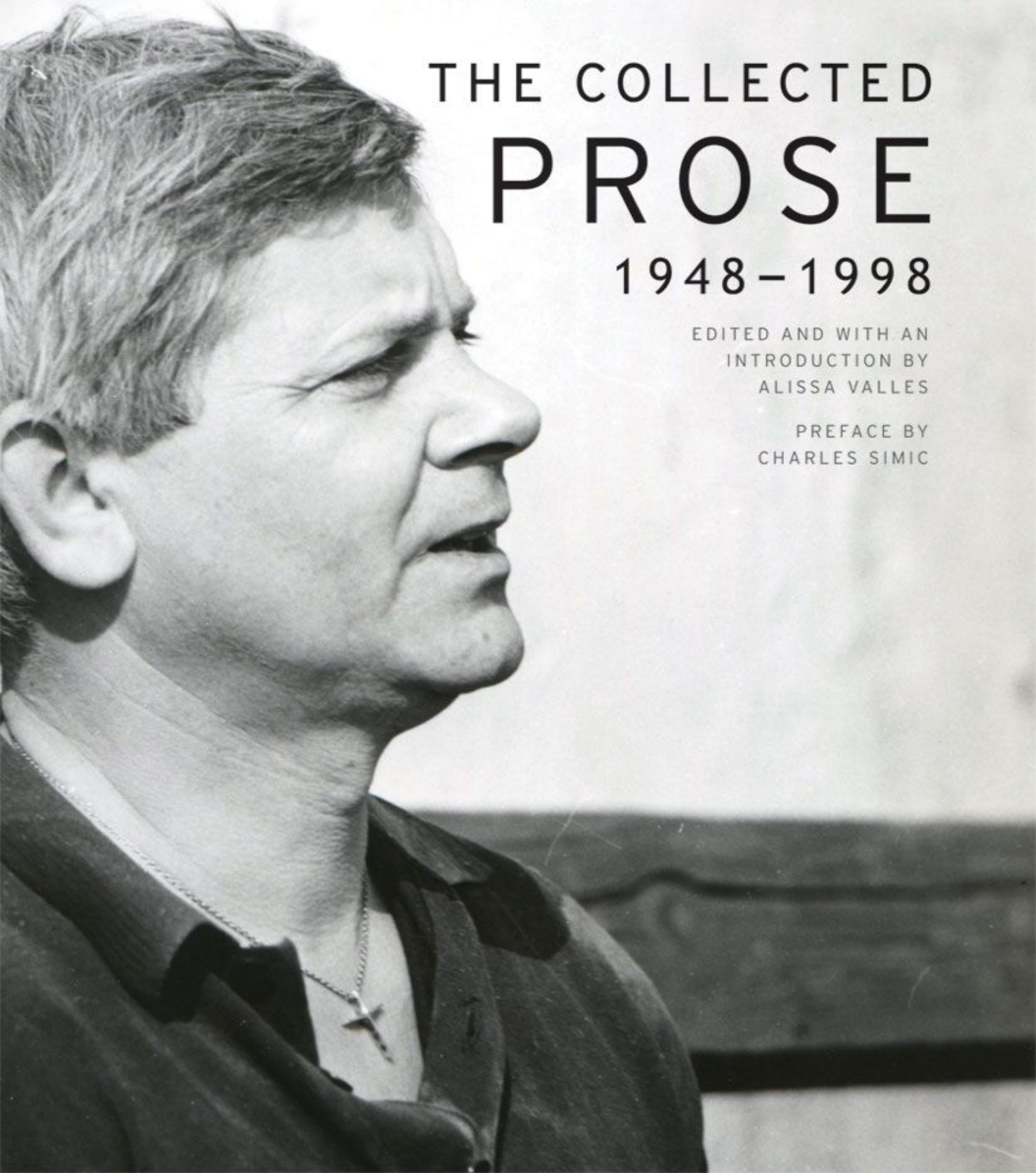
ZBIGNIEW HERBERT



THE COLLECTED PROSE 1948–1998

EDITED AND WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY ALISSA VALLES

PREFACE BY CHARLES SIMIC

The Collected Prose

1948–1998

Edited and with an Introduction by Alissa Valles
Preface by Charles Simic
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Zbigniew Herbert

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Contents

Preface by Charles Simic

Introduction by Alissa Valles

Barbarian in the Garden

- Lascaux
- Among the Dorians
- Arles
- Orvieto's Duomo
- Siena
- A Stone from the Cathedral
- Albigensians, Inquisitors, and Troubadours
- Defense of the Templars
- Piero della Francesca
- Memories of Valois

Still Life with a Bridle

Essays

- Delta
- The Price of Art
- The Bitter Smell of Tulips

Gerard Terborch: The Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie

Still Life with a Bridle

The Nonheroic Subject

Apocryphas

The Mercy of the Executioner

The Captain

Long Gerrit

Portrait in a Black Frame

The Hell of Insects

Perpetuum Mobile

Home

Spinoza's Bed

Letter

Epilogue

The King of the Ants

(According to the Definitive Polish Edition; Krakow, 2008)

I Black Figure Vase by Eksekias

II The Gods of the Copybook Headings

H.E.O.

Antaeus

The Infernal Dog

Triptolemos

The king of the Ants

This Horrible Thersites

Cleomedes

Narcissus

Endymion

The Olympian General

Securitas

Atlas

Prometheus

Old Prometheus

Arachne

The History of the Minotaur

Achilles. Penthesilea

Hecuba

Phya

Sacrifice

III Ten Paths of Virtue

IV From the King of Ants Cycle (unfinished or abandoned)

Anti-Epic

The Garden of the Hesperides

Poseidon’s Retinue

Pegasus

Dragon

Giants

Introduction to “Atlas” (Autobiographical Note)
Annex (Variants)
Narcissus
Sacrifice—Dionysus
Labyrinth on the Sea
Labyrinth on the Sea
Attempt at a Description of the Greek Landscape
Animula
Acropolis
The Samos Affair
On the Etruscans
A Latin Lesson
Short Prose (1948–1998)
Poetry in a Vacuum?
Shield us from the Dark Word…
Character Sketches
Hamlet on the Border of Silence
Request
Leonardo’s Disquiet
Guinea Pig, or On the Power of Reason
A Bitter Rose Petal
Van Gogh’s Sad Popularity
Why the Classics
To Describe Reality

Monsieur Montaigne's Voyage to Italy

The Poet and the Present

Conversation on Writing Poetry

The Presence of History

Quality and Nullity in Mass Culture

Voice

Mirror

The Gordian Knot

Pact

Passo Romano

Sinope

David

Altichiero

For the road

Thomas

Evil

A Word for the Poetry Evening at the National Theater, May 25, 1998

Acknowledgments

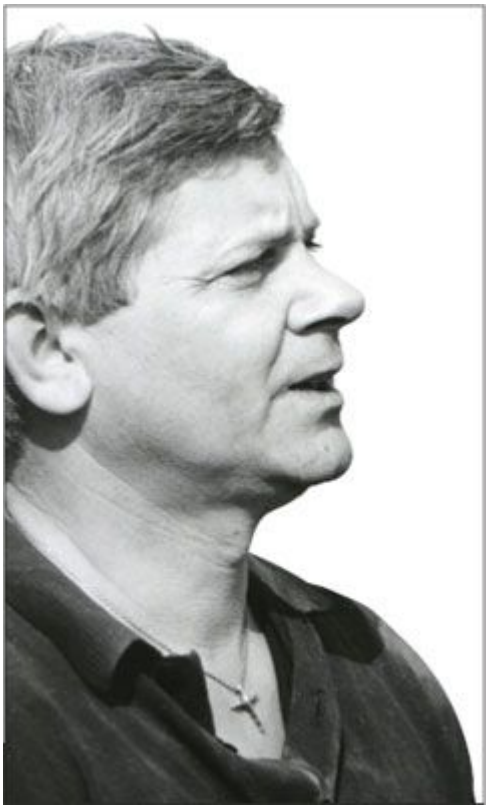
About the Authors

Other Books by Zbigniew Herbert

Credits

Copyright

About the Publisher



Frontispiece © Michal Kapitaniak

Preface

BY CHARLES SIMIC

ZBIGNIEW HERBERT (1924–1998) was one of the most original and memorable poets of the twentieth century. His Polish compatriots, Czeslaw Milosz and Wyslawa Szymborska, may have received the Nobel Prize, but as the appearance of *The Collected Poems, 1956–1998* in English recently demonstrated, he was in every respect their equal. This publication of his complete prose ought to increase his stature even more among those who know Herbert only as a poet and not as the fine prose writer that he was. It will come as a surprise to his readers that in his essays, unlike those by most other poets who write prose, his focus is rarely on poetry. Herbert wrote about painting and architecture. Or rather, he wrote three books about his travels in Greece, Italy, France, and the Netherlands, to see art. The author, he tells us at one point, is not a professional historian, but a story teller, and in truth many of the essays are dedicated to friends and often read like good after-dinner talk. The result is a book about art that is unlike any one has ever encountered, by a man who had lived through some of the most violent and tragic years in modern history and whom one would not expect to take a calm appraisal of our common past.

Born in Lvov, one of the most dangerous places in the world to be from 1939 to 1945, Herbert survived the occupation of his hometown, first by the Soviet Union and then by the Nazis who transformed the old city with its mixed population of Poles, Russians, Ukrainians, and Jews into a veritable hell. In 1944, before Lvov was once again taken by the Soviets, Herbert's family escaped to Kraków where he attended lectures at the university and drawing classes at the Academy of Fine Arts while obtaining a degree in economics at the Trade Academy and eventually a law degree at the Nicholas Copernicus University in Toruń. As a member of the anti-

Communist Home Army during the war, he was regarded as politically suspect and not employable in important positions. He worked as a primary school teacher, an editor of an economic journal, a shop attendant, a timekeeper in a cooperative, an accountant, a bank clerk, and a librarian. Occasionally, he published theatre and music criticism and reviews of exhibitions, but not until 1950 did his poems appear in a magazine, and his first book, *Chord of Light*, did not come out until 1956 when he was already thirty-two years old. Unwilling to submit to the official party line in literature and write political propaganda, he could not make a living as a writer. One tough year after the war, he had to supplement his income by selling his blood.

Herbert later attributed his reluctance to fall on his knees before the new masters not to his bravery or strength of character, but to his sense of taste. He found everything about Communism ugly, especially its rhetoric. Aesthetics played a subversive role in his refusal to become one of the corrupted. Philosophy, too, I would imagine, which he studied first in Toruń and then at the University of Warsaw where he moved in 1950. "Let words mean only what they mean," he quotes another writer in one of his essays. In his poems, too, Herbert sought semantic transparency. For him, a bird is a bird, slavery means slavery, a knife is a knife, death remains death. This was a view of language guaranteed to make life difficult for an individual living in a totalitarian country. As for poetry, its task, he wrote as early as 1948, is to render justice to the visible world, justice and beauty. Here's one of his many fine early poems that does just that. It recounts a complex experience in a language that manages to be both plain and memorable.

A HALT

We halted in a town the host
ordered the table to be moved to the garden the first star
shone out and faded we were breaking bread
crickets were heard in the twilight loosestrife
a cry but a cry of a child otherwise the bustle
of insects of men a thick scent of earth
those who were sitting with their backs to the wall
saw violet now—the gallows hill
on the wall the dense ivy of executions
we were eating much
as is usual when nobody pays

(trans. by Czeslaw Milosz and Peter Dale Scott)

From the very beginning, Herbert's poems had one notable quality; many of them dealt with Greek and Roman antiquity. These were not the reverential versions of ancient myths and historical events one normally encounters in poetry in which the poet neither questions the philosophical nor the ethical premises of the classical models, but were ironic reevaluations from the point of view of someone who had experienced modern wars and revolutions and who knew well that true to Homeric tradition only the high and mighty are usually glorified and lamented in their death and never the mounds of their anonymous victims. What drew him to the classics, nevertheless, is the recognition that these tales and legends contain all the essential human experiences. To have a historical consciousness meant seeing the continuity of the past as well as recognizing the continuity and the inescapable presence of past errors, crimes, but also the examples of courage and wisdom in our contemporary lives. History is the balance sheet of conscience. It condemns, reminds, robs us of peace, and also enlightens us now and then. In his view, our predicament has always been both tragic and comic. Even the old gods ended just like us. This is how he describes their decline in an essay called "Sacrifice" in *The King of the Ants.*

> Stained tablecloths, traces of cigarettes around the small plates on the conference table of Olympus, unchanged napkins wilting flowers in crystal vases, and a monotonous menu, a poor choice of wine—that itself bore witness to the gods' profound crisis. Gods didn't turn up or willfully left the conferences, they partook of gods' gifts unaesthetically (and against the rules), they slept at the table or emitted loud bodily noises. The fate of the world was slipping out of their hands…"We could have foreseen such an end of the world," Zeus said to Hermes, "we're not immortal, *hélas*, but the way this is proceeding is abominable in form; it's shocking. We will leave nothing behind, not even a fond memory. But not everything in our time was bad—we have to do something about it," Zeus said to Hermes.

Herbert claims that even as a youth he did not thirst for originality, which he saw as easier to achieve if you scorn the past and don't respect either its authorities or its traditions. This positivist theory of "progress," which lurks in the background of every avant-garde movement in art and literature, he had no use for. He found this attitude alien, even odious. He always wanted to adore, to fall on his knees and bow down before greatness, even if it overwhelmed him and terrified him—for "what kind of greatness would it be if it didn't overwhelm and terrify"? Nonetheless, Herbert is well aware that history doesn't know a single example of art or an artist ever exerting a direct influence on the world's destiny. The conclusion he draws from that melancholy knowledge is that artists, writers, and poets ought to be modest and "conscious of their limited role and strength." If this sounds like an aesthete's credo, it is not. Herbert's wish was to abolish the antagonism between art and life which the Romantics erected and modern poets and painters largely embraced. If this marvelous collection of his essays and short pieces proves anything, it is that art and life are part of the same fabric of human experience.

There exists a false view, Herbert writes, to the effect that tradition is like a fortune, a legacy which we inherit mechanically, without effort, while in fact every contact with the past requires an effort and a labor from learning about the past to verifying that knowledge through direct contact with its works of art. The task he sets himself in these pilgrimages is to find, after the horrors of war and totalitarianism he had just witnessed, some values worth living for. His essays combine leisurely traveler's accounts intermixed with descriptions of paintings and churches he sees, towns he visits, their history, the people he encounters, the food he eats, the wine he drinks, and all sorts of other matters of interest to this exceptionally erudite and entertaining man who is our guide. For instance, writing of the Perugian republic, he remarks that "they were vengeful and cruel, artistically refined enough to slaughter their enemies on beautiful summer evenings."

Herbert never had much money, but he went everywhere, at one point even having the crazy notion of visiting every cathedral in France. As a foreigner, and a kind of amateur scholar, he sees in these art works what professional academics and natives do not. This is the continuous delight of these essays. We are led by an eye that reacts in a fresh and inspired way to objects and events that do not exist for the practical eye. “There’s no path to the world but the path of compassion,” he says at one point. It surprised me to hear him say that, but after recalling the care he took to get every little detail right of whatever he saw in his travels, I began to understand what he meant, and so will you. This is a rare book, written by a very great poet and very wise man.

CHARLES SIMIC

Introduction

BY ALISSA VALLES

THE HALF-CENTURY SPANNED BY the essays in this volume began in Poland with the chill of Stalinism settling on the scene of devastation left by the Nazi occupation, and ended at a time when the elation of 1989 and the fall of Communism had been overshadowed by the economic, social and political turmoil of post-Communist reality. Although Zbigniew Herbert was born in 1924 in an independent Polish state, for the greater part of his life he had little cause to believe he would end his life in one, or indeed in any kind of Poland. He led a life of incessant movement, driven by internal and external causes, all of which are in varying measures reflected in his prose. Herbert moved in flight—from armies and repressive authorities, and in pursuit—of freedom, knowledge and beauty, and on occasion, medical care and income. He had before him a long tradition of Eastern European writers who traveled to Western centers of culture—Paris, London, Berlin, Rome, after the war increasingly New York—seeking points of connection with European or Western tradition and an escape from a politically oppressed or culturally oppressive native country.

But though it was nothing new for Polish poets to dream of an independent homeland while bivouaking in foreign café's, Herbert's angle of vision differed significantly from that of many of his (chiefly Romantic) predecessors. Not only had he come of age in a war born in the heart of Europe, seen intellectual, political and physical brutality overwhelm the continent and his own country used as a site of mass slavery and slaughter, but at the very moment that Western nations celebrated the liberation from Nazism and Fascism, they had abandoned the Poles and their exiled government to the mercy

of Stalin. The consciousness of that betrayal, most painfully embodied in the story of the 1944 Warsaw Uprising, imbued Herbert's attitude toward the West with a deep ambivalence. From that clash of old veneration and fresh pain sprang the sharp irony that characterized his world view and his writing from the start.

In 1944, following the retreat of German forces, Herbert fled westward from his birthplace, Lvov, on the eve of its re-occupation by Soviet troops. He, his parents and his sister landed in Kraków, where he studied economics and (on a more casual footing) painting and acting. His parents eventually settled in Sopot on the Baltic Coast, while Herbert worked toward a masters in law at the old university of Toruń, where he also pursued graduate studies in philosophy with his first important mentor, professor Henryk Elzenberg. Even after he decamped to Warsaw in 1950, Herbert continued to correspond with Elzenberg, justifying his decision to give up the academic study of philosophy in favor of poetry:

> [In philosophy] I look for emotion. Powerful intellectual emotion, painful tensions between reality and abstraction, yet another rending, yet another, deeper than personal, cause for sorrow. And in that subjective cloud, respectable truth and sublime measure are lost, so I'll never be a decent university philosopher. I prefer suffering philosophy to brooding on it like a hen. I would rather it be a fruitless struggle—a personal cause, something going against the order of life—than a profession.

During the years when Herbert was publishing his first poems and reviews in periodicals, he reported to Elzenberg on his reading and sent him early unpublished poems, as well as the essay "Hamlet on the Border of Silence," included in the selection of short prose in this volume. This essay is an initial working-through of the notion that philosophy must be "suffered" or "lived through," and that one pays for intellectual clarity with heartbreak, humiliation and at dark

moments in history, death. The tragedy of Hamlet helps Herbert begin to articulate a stance of tragic humanism which, too uncertain to be a faith, nevertheless constituted a strong frame for his subsequent explorations and aided him in his resistance to the stifling ideological atmosphere of the 50s, when his elected "master" Elzenberg himself, forced into early retirement, became a victim of the side-lining of non-conformist (non-Party) intellectuals.

The political thaw that followed Stalin's death made it possible for Herbert—and a number of his gifted contemporaries—to publish a first poetry collection in 1956 without compromise to censorship. Herbert rapidly followed his debut *Chord of Light* with a sizeable second collection, *Hermes, Dag and Star*, roughly half of which was made up of prose poems. In 1958, the young poet with a growing reputation received a stipend from the Ministry of Culture for travel in Western Europe, and Herbert set out on his first expedition to France, Italy and England. In Paris he formed important friendships with members of the Polish émigré community, notably with the artists Józef Czapski and Jan Lebenstein, and with Czeslaw Milosz, who was both mentor and rival to him, an increasingly difficult combination in the years that followed.

These wanderings, from which he returned to Poland in 1960, resulted in the essay collection *Barbarian in the Garden*, published in Warsaw in 1962. In a brief preface to the book, Herbert wrote that he thought of the book simply as an "account of a journey":

> The first, a real journey to cities, museums and ruins. The other a journey through books on the places I visited. The two ways of seeing, the two methods, are interwoven.
>
> I didn't choose the easier form of an impressionistic diary, because in the end that would only lead to a litany of adjectives and aesthetic exaltation. I thought that I should convey a certain amount of information on remote civilizations, and given that I am not an expert but an amateur, I refrained from all the delights of erudition: bibliography, notes, indices. I set out to write a book for

reading, not for scholarly study. In art I am interested in the timeless value of a work (Piero della Francesca's eternity), its technical structure (how stone is laid upon stone in a Gothic cathedral) and its connection to history. Because the lion's share of the book is devoted to the Middle Ages, I decided to include two historical essays, on the Albigensians and the Templars, which speak of the sound and fury of the era.

If I had to choose an epigraph for the whole book, I would take a sentence from Malraux:

"That evening, while Rembrandt is still sketching, all the famous shades and shadows of the cave painters closely follow his wavering hand, which will grant them a new afterlife or a new oblivion".

The essays in *Barbarian* are also a roughly chronological journey, from the prehistoric caves of Lascaux to the Greek presence in Italy in the 7th and 6th centuries BCE, to the Romans in Arles in the 1st century AD, to the six pieces centered on the late medieval era and early Renaissance, capped with a final tour of Northern France spiked with epigraphs from Rousseau and Nerval, who bring us up to the modern age. Caves, reintroduced into eighteenth century gardens at Ermenonville as refuges from the corruption of human society, bring the narrative full circle. Cities like Paris, with its "chatter of lights" become sites which one must flee if one wishes to preserve one's sensitivities. Only art—the "warm touch of the Lascaux painter"—can make human beings feel briefly at home in a world 'rushing towards death'.

In the 1960s, Herbert again spent long stretches of time in Paris, making it his base for an expedition to Greece and Italy in the fall of 1964 with his friends Zbigniew and Magdalena Czajkowski, and marrying Katarzyna Dzieduszycka at the Polish Consulate in Paris in 1968. The Greek excursion led to another series of essays, most of them published in Polish journals between 1966 and 1973, but put out as a book, *Labyrinth on the Sea* (1999), only after Herbert's death. Why

the manuscript of *Labyrinth* languished in the editorial offices of the publishing house Czytelnik in Warsaw from 1972 to 1981 is difficult to prove—but it is not hard to make an educated guess. During the 70's Herbert had become increasingly engaged in political protest in Poland, and in that period his name appeared on a list of authors subject to censorship. *Mr Cogito* (1974) was the last book he published at Czytelnik; archive research has shown that one poem intended for inclusion in that collection, "Mr Cogito's Heraldic Meditations" was removed by the censor. No censor would have been pleased to run into himself, even transposed to Periclean Athens, as he would have reading "The Samos Affair":

> It is a thing worth reflecting on that the immediate consequence of the Samian war was the introduction of censorship—the first in Athenian history—which forbade comic poets to represent persons on stage under their true names…. It testifies to a profound internal crisis beginning to show.
>
> The drastic controls on freedom of speech prove that the popular mood must have in fact been quite different from the official enthusiasm and optimism.

After martial law was declared in December 1981, Herbert did not publish anything he wrote with state publishers but instead published with émigré or underground presses, until the dissolution of the Communist regime in 1989.

Like *Barbarian, Labyrinth* traces a path forward in time (and geographically northward) from a prehistoric culture—the Minoans of Crete—through the Mycenean era up to the summit of classical Greece, the Acropolis, to the Etruscans in Italy and the Romans in England. The two collections share an acute interest in changing conceptions of beauty, in patterns of conquest, empire and decline, and in the manifold ways the past is discovered, invented or erased by successive generations. In his encounter with Greece, Herbert deepens his search for the sources of European civilization, while focusing

more squarely on the nature of myth, its porous border with history, and its relation to physical landscape. He also continues a meditation, initiated in *Barbarian*, on the coexistence of cruelty and aesthetic refinement in human cultures. The apparent paradox of the Inquisition being born at the same time as the masterpieces of Gothic architecture receives a more emblematic statement in the image of the Etruscans flogging their slaves to musical accompaniment.

Herbert's essays do not attempt to formulate any systematic theory of culture. The closest he comes to a general view is concisely put toward the end of his short essay "Animula": *I always wished I would never lose the belief that great works of the spirit are more objective than we are. And that they will judge us.* Among the "great works of the spirit" he counts both myths and made objects. His aim is to be a conduit of cultural tradition, in his words, to "exert my whole sensibility and understanding so that the Acropolis, the cathedrals, the Mona Lisa would be repeated in me." This striving is linked here (and in the poem "Mona Lisa") to a sense of guilt for having survived the war in which so many exact contemporaries had perished. He concludes the essay with a view of tradition that echoes T. S. Eliot's famous essay "Tradition and the Individual Talent," with an added political twist:

> There exists a false view to the effect that tradition is like a fortune, a legacy, which we inherit mechanically, without effort, and that is why those who object to inherited wealth and unearned privileges are against tradition. But in fact every contact with the past requires an effort, a labor, and a difficult and thankless labor to boot, for our little 'I' whines and balks at it.

Although the reference to the Communist world is unmistakable here, Herbert engages in cultural criticism of a kind that can often be just as easily understood to refer to the West as to "People's Poland." Herbert's contact with the West (and the liberal cultural movements of the sixties) prompted a hardening of his attitude toward the avantgarde, or the radical

left as manifest in culture and art. This was particularly true of the time he spent in the United States.

In 1968, Herbert's *Selected Poems* in English appeared at Penguin, and he made his first transatlantic journey, giving readings in New York, Berkeley and Los Angeles. He returned to the U.S. for the academic year of 1970–1971 as a visiting professor of European literature at what was then California State College in Los Angeles. While in California, he formed warm friendships with a number of American poets, Philip Levine and Henri Coulette among them, and although he did not report on America in essay form, the poet Larry Levis, who at that time taught at Cal State, left an account of his encounters with Herbert in Los Angeles. Lecture notes left in Herbert's archive bear witness to the time and attention he devoted to his students at the college, despite his rather stunned response to the limitations of their education. Alongside his classes, he also held informal meetings with aspiring poets, which he by all accounts greatly enjoyed. But unlike Czeslaw Milosz (by then settled in Berkeley) who found in America's literature and above all its natural world an enduring fascination and inspiration, Herbert's interests and projects remained anchored in Europe.

Traces of the American experience can be found in later writings, as for example in a talk he gave at a Polish poetry festival in 1972, "The Poet in Face of the Present".

> A few months ago I returned from America; the necessity of "engagement" came up regularly in private conversations with my American friends. The term itself is vague enough to put one off using it. The majority of young people in the West who dabble in film, art, or literature, loudly declare they are on the side of the "Left"—variously understood, or rather, read. And I often wonder why the work that results from this essentially noble stance is intellectually immature, as if the proclamation of humanist ideals led the artist into the realm of banality.

This talk was given in the context of arguing against a tendency among the younger "New Wave" poets in Poland to make their anti-Communist stance the main content of their poems. The polemic gave rise to one of Herbert's finest poems, "To Ryszard Krynicki—A Letter," which affirms the duty of poets to rise above the level of politics, no matter how just their political cause. His confrontational relations with the younger poets—Adam Zagajewski, Stanislaw Baranczak and Ryszard Krynicki among them—gradually developed into warm friendships and differing degrees of mentorship.

After a few years back in Poland, in 1975 Herbert and his wife again decamped, this time to Berlin, where they remained until early 1981. Herbert had more of an intellectual community in Berlin than in the United States, and he was warmly embraced as a poet in Germany, and before long also in Holland. In 1976, Herbert made a first visit to the Netherlands, where he participated in the Poetry International festival in Rotterdam and visited museums in Amsterdam and other cities. Dutch art and culture became Herbert's next major object of fascination and study, and in the course of the following decade and a half (with another Dutch visit in 1988) he wrote the essays in *Still-Life with a Bridle*, which appeared in Poland in 1993. Here Herbert brings to light the submerged passions of an apparently staid and sober culture, rendering vividly the drama of water, the drama of commerce, science, and, in the title essay, the dramatic biography of Torrentius, a painter of the most becalmed of genres, the still-life. In Dutch culture, with its anti-heroic bent, Herbert finds myth almost entirely subsumed by objects—the new heroes—and the gods and theologies of the Greeks and Italians stripped down to the bare, hushed interior of a Calvinist church and the dry QED's of Spinoza. Herbert is fascinated by the tension between the Dutch passion for material goods (often involving foreign conquest) and their religious rationalism and austerity, by the way the mystical impulse, banished from spiritual life, entered the life of science and commerce. In his essay "The Bitter Smell of Tulips" he expresses his particular fondness for "follies in the sanctuaries of reason." Herbert's last trip abroad, undertaken when his health was in severe decline, was a last visit to Amsterdam to see an exhibition on 17th century

“tulipmania” at the Nieuwe Kerk, one of the city’s largest cathedrals.

ALTHOUGH HERBERT CONSIDERED HIMSELF lucky to be able to travel widely during a period when freedoms were so severely curtailed or denied without appeal to the vast majority of his fellow Poles, it is important to realize the difficulties accompanying these travels and the unwanted attention they attracted. The application for a visa for foreign travel was a long and tortuous process requiring not only long queues, arbitrary waiting periods and tedious forms, but also unpleasant encounters with the security police. A postcard to Katarzyna, sent in France in 1958, shows that Herbert thought he was already under surveillance. In a letter to Czeslaw Milosz, written in 1969, Herbert described an interrogation to which he was subjected upon returning to Poland from France.

> I hadn’t expected to feel the touch of the gentlemen in little black suits. They phoned me on the day after I arrived* (it was Easter and I thought “they” too would be eating sausage and drinking). Then there were regular daily “conversations” lasting many hours, not at headquarters God forbid but at the top of the Metropol hotel with a window open on the courtyard. I could go out the window and not come back and my friends would say I’d been drunk, that I’d always had nihilistic tendencies, there you go. […] They were interested in many things, among them Trotskyite movements in the West, but mainly the émigré’s, whom they would most like to lure into their pit. They asked me all about you too, whether you might not come back, and I summarized *The Issa Valley* for them and analyzed your poetry, pretending you interested them as the best living Polish poet. I played the fool, but it was no fun. I was alarmed to find that I wasn’t used to it anymore, that I wasn’t good at strolling around with shit on my head, and that I’m a coward because I fear for the rest of my life. It made me

> sick (insomnia, depression) but I'm fine now and working.

Naturally, there were also economic constraints: although Herbert first went abroad in 1958 on a grant from the Ministry of Culture, the sums he disposed of were modest indeed. His essays give occasional glimpses of the circumstances under which he made his pilgrimages to ancient sites and great art collections, and the ways he found to extend his meager resources over as many days and miles as possible, as on Crete, "more frugally than ever dividing my melting drachmas, to trick fate out of one more day, two more days…." He travels on crowded buses and trains, subsists on humble (but tasty) meals and sleeps in cheap hostels, doing without cabs, rental cars, complimentary soaps, and other luxuries. His essays are constructed from copious notes and sketches made in museums, libraries and at the sites of ruins, churches, battlefields, as well as at the various public establishments where he sits recovering from hours of wandering, watching locals go about their daily lives, and interacting with them as naturally as a traveler's odd status permits.

One model traveler for Herbert is Montaigne, as we discover from a brief essay of 1966, "Monsieur Montaigne's Voyage to Italy." Although Montaigne seems less interested in art than in the gastronomies and technologies of the regions he visits, he has the gift of "perspicacity and curiosity," the ability to listen with unfailing attention to "everyone and everything." Herbert particularly values encounters with what he calls the "inimitable, individual beauty of life," which he feels has become elusive to modern travelers, who move too rapidly across continents and whose experience is at every point mediated by timid convention and commercial cliché. In his own travels, he continually courts the "benign divinities of Nature and Accident," delighting in ferry delays, storms at sea, outdated guidebooks, inaccurate directions, unplanned meetings, unexpected glimpses of the raw edges of life; he seeks to recover the living emotion with which earlier human

beings might have regarded the great edifices or landscapes with which they dwelled.

Herbert is everywhere in his prose engaged in a polemic against ways of reading and writing history he considers false —whether narrow, petty, self-indulgent, expedient, naïve or cynical. He is everywhere alert to history written under the spell of what Czeslaw Milosz (in *The Captive Mind*) called the "Hegelian sting": the temptation to see force triumphant as historical necessity. In the talk "The Presence of History," given in Germany around 1975, as in the essay in *Barbarian in the Garden* entitled "Defense of the Templars," Herbert uses the Hegelian notion of the "high tribunal of history," to assert the duty of a chronicler of historical events to "weigh the sacrifice" of those who fought in vain for ideals or principles. Herbert knows better than most that the viewpoint of history's underdogs is not by definition truer than that of its usual narrators, the conquerors. But the voices on both sides must be heard, and Herbert is always keen to take on the defense of the noble loser. Human acts have a certain weight, which it is a historian's task to register, without pretence of perfect objectivity, to the full reach of his or her faculties of reason and empathy. When professional historians neglect this task, others must pick up the slack. Otherwise the field will be stampeded by demagogues seeking to justify their own power plays or "inspire" peoples to violent acts by feeding them distorted tales of ancestral battles, triumphs and humiliations. And quite apart from any practical application, the act of doing justice to the past (speaking of it justly) is a consolation for the irredeemable losses of history and, for Herbert, a value in itself requiring no justification.

DURING A STRETCH OF time partly overlapping with the composition of *Still Life with a Bridle*, Herbert also worked on a collection of short prose pieces which re-imagine and fill out ancient myths; the project was left unfinished but a version of it was published posthumously as *The King of the Ants*. The pieces are not linked directly to travel, but may be traced back

to Herbert's early "character sketches," to the prose poems or fables included in his volumes of poetry, and to the "apocryphas" of *Still Life*. The editor of the Polish edition of *King of the Ants*, Ryszard Krynicki, attempting to reconstruct the complicated history of the project, points to a handwritten booklet with the title *Bajki* (Fables), put together by Herbert and given to a friend in 1953, as evidence that the poet's life was from the very outset accompanied and fed by experiments in fabular prose. Krynicki points to Berlin and 1979 or 1980 as the probable place and time of origin for *King of the Ants*, which Herbert first called *Atlas* and furnished with epigraphs from Flaubert's *Dictionary of Received Ideas*. The work may be seen as Herbert's own *Who's Who* of received heroes, or as a manual for de-and reconstructing myths; for Krynicki it is, in any case, a summary of an essential theme in his writing, as well as one of Herbert's most personal works.

The American edition of *King of the Ants* appeared several years before the Polish edition and did not include all of the pieces and fragments included by Krynicki; but in my view its subtitle, "mythological essays," reflects better the unfinished and open form of the book than Krynicki's subtitle, "a private mythology." John and Bogdana Carpenter write in the preface to their 1999 translation: "In his prose essays Herbert never simply retells a myth; instead, he presents a re-creation of it and emphasizes a narrative. The old story or fragmentary text serves as a canvas for a new story that he carries far from its original point of departure. It is a springboard for a broader exploration of human behavior…The "mythological essay" becomes a twentieth-century philosophical parable." The form allows Herbert a playful freedom from the gravitas of human history with which he grapples elsewhere. On the one hand, these narratives carry an implicit challenge to the controlling idea of modern man that he is, as Mircea Eliade put it, "the result of the course of Universal History," rather than of mythical events which must be periodically re-enacted and reiterated.[*] On the other hand, the satirical tone and deep ironies of the myths reiterated and comically altered by Herbert also work to deflate the pseudo-mythologies

propagated by some modern political and religious movements.

THE SELECTION OF SHORT prose in this volume is taken from a fat prose collection published in Poland in 2001 under the title *The Gordian Knot*. The book offers a recapitulation of major preoccupations in Herbert's work and is particularly valuable for the way it shows the arc of evolution of his thinking about poetry, from the dapper battle-cry "Poetry in a Vacuum?" (1948) to "A Word for the Poetry Evening…" (1998), an attempt to place himself in the Polish poetry tradition, balancing, as he says "between irony and sublimity," and also between poetry and prose. I tried to adhere to a principle of selection which would most effectively render that evolution. I left out reviews of local art exhibits and Polish publications inaccessible to an English-language readership, and included only pieces touching directly on poetic or artistic craft and cultural tradition, or themselves constituting a literary project. There are no letters here—private or public—simply because I feel Herbert's voluminous and rich correspondence deserves a volume to itself. Nor did I include fragments or variants beyond the ones included in the Polish edition of *The King of the Ants*. Herbert's archive continues to yield new material, but unfinished or abandoned archival texts require a different format for publication, one offering a fuller scholarly apparatus than the present volume can accommodate.

As editor of this book, I was asked by the Herbert estate to revise Jarosław Anders and Michael March's translation of *Barbarian in the Garden* to accord with the most recent Polish edition, correcting minor errors and omissions. Upon request, I also added to John and Bogdana Carpenter's translation of *King of the Ants* all texts absent from the American edition but included in the Polish edition, reordered the contents according to the latter, and corrected one error, the translation of the title of "H.E.O." as "Eos," due no doubt to the fact that the translation was undertaken on the basis of an unedited

manuscript. In all cases I have tried to fit my additions to the style of the original translations, and above all to respect Herbert's own style, which I consider one of the triumphs of the 20th century.

BARBARIAN IN THE GARDEN

translated by

Michael March and Jarosław Anders

LASCAUX

Si Altamira est la capitale de l'art pariétal[1]

Lascaux en est Versailles.

HENRI BREUIL

LASCAUX IS NOT on any official map. It does not exist, at least not in the same sense as London or Radom. One had to enquire at the Musée de l'homme in Paris to learn its location.

I went in early spring. The Vézère Valley was rising in its fresh, unfinished green. Fragments of landscape seen through the bus window resembled canvases by Bissière. A texture of tender green.

Montignac. A village without interest, save a plaque commemorating a worthy midwife: "Ici vécut Madame Marie Martel—sage-femme—officier d'Académie[2]. Sa vie…c'était faire du bien. Sa joie…accomplir son devoir." Expressed most delicately.

Breakfast in a small restaurant, but what a breakfast! An omelette with truffles. Truffles belong to the world history of human folly, hence to the history of art. So a word about truffles.

They are an underground mushroom preying on the roots of other plants. To uncover them you need dogs or pigs, conspicuous, as everyone knows, for their perfect sense of smell. A certain fly also signals the presence of this gastronomic treasure.

Truffles fetched a high price on the market so the local peasants were overcome by a real truffle fever. The soil was burrowed, the woods ravaged; the trees now stand pitifully dry. Large areas of cultivable land became barren because the mushroom produced a poisonous substance. Besides, it was very capricious and more difficult to domesticate than the ordinary mushroom. Nonetheless, an omelette with truffles is delicious and the smell, as the dish has no taste, is incomparable. Just like the poet Tuwim's mignonette.

One leaves Montignac by a motorway that rises, winds, enters a forest and suddenly ends. A parking lot. A stand with Coca Cola and color postcards. Those who are not satisfied with the reproductions are led into a yard, and then into a concrete cellar resembling a military bunker. Metal valves close like a strongroom door and for a moment we stand in darkness awaiting the initiation. Finally, the second door opens, leading inside. We are in the cave.

The cold electric light is hideous, so we can only imagine the Lascaux cave when the living light of torches and cressets set into motion the herds of bulls, bison, and deer on the walls and vault. In addition, the guide's voice stammering explanations. A sergeant reading the Holy Scriptures.

The colors: black, brown, ochre, vermilion, crimson, mallow, and limestone white. Their vitality and freshness surpassing Renaissance frescoes. The colors of earth, blood, and ash.

Images of animals, mostly in profile, are caught in motion drawn with both an expansive vigor and the tenderness and warmth of Modigliani's women.

The images appear chaotic, as though painted hastily by a frenetic genius using cinematic techniques, with close and long-range shots. At the same time they present a coherent, panoramic composition which seems to disobey all rules. They vary from a few centimeters to more than five meters. One finds palimpsests: in short, a classical disorder which simultaneously conveys an impression of perfect harmony.

The first room, called the room of the bulls, has a beautiful natural vault, as though constructed from frozen clouds. Ten meters wide, thirty meters long, it can hold a hundred people. The Lascaux zoo opens with the image of a bicorn. This fantastic creature has a mighty body, a short neck, and a small head with two immense, straight horns. Its small head resembles a rhinoceros, yet it is unlike any living or fossil animal. Its mysterious presence forewarns that we shall not view an atlas of natural history but a region of ritual, incantation, and magic. Historians agree that the Lascaux cave was not a place of habitation but a sanctuary, the underground Sistine Chapel of our forefathers.

The Vézère River curves among limestone hills covered by forest. At its lower reaches, just before it flows into the Dordogne, a large number of caves inhabited by Paleolithic man were discovered. His skeleton, found in Cro-Magnon, resembles contemporary man's. The Cro-Magnon probably originated in Asia and began his assault on Europe after the last glaciation, some thirty or forty thousand years before the Christian era. He pitilessly exterminated the less advanced Neanderthal, usurping his caves and hunting grounds. Mankind was born under the star of Cain.

Southern France and northern Spain were the territories where the new conqueror, *Homo sapiens,* created a civilization later called the Franco-Cantabrian culture. It developed in the early Paleolithic, also named the "reindeer" era. From the mid-Paleolithic the environment of Lascaux became a real Promised Land, flowing not so much with milk and mead as with the hot blood of animals. Like cities that later grew near the trade routes, the stone-age settlements were founded on the tracks of migrating animals. Every spring, herds of reindeer, wild horses, cows, bulls, bison, and rhinoceri crossed this territory to the green pastures of the Auvergne. The mysterious regularity and the blessed lack of memory in the animals, who yearly followed the same trail to certain death, was as miraculous for Paleolithic man as the Nile floods for the ancient Egyptians.

A powerful supplication for the eternal preservation of the natural order can be read from the walls of Lascaux. That is

probably why the cave painters are the greatest animal artists in history. For them, unlike for the Dutch masters, an animal was not an element in a tame landscape in pastoral Arcadia; they saw it in a flash, in dramatic flight, alive but marked for death. Their eye does not contemplate the object but fetters it in its black contour line with the precision of the perfect murderer.

The first room was probably the site of hunting rituals. (They came here with stone cressets for their guttural rites.) It takes its name from four huge bulls, the largest being more than five meters long; these magnificent animals dominate a herd of horses painted in silhouette and fragile deer with fantastic antlers. Their stampede blasts the cave. In their inflated nostrils, the condensation of hoarse breathing.

The room leads into a blind, narrow corridor. What the French call “l’heureux désordre des figures” reigns here. Red cows, small childish horses, and bucks dance in all directions in indescribable chaos. A horse on its back, hooves stretched towards the limestone sky, gives evidence of a practice still current among primitive hunting tribes: animals are driven with fire and loud noise towards a high cliff and topple to their deaths.

One of the most beautiful animal portraits in history is called the “Chinese Horse.” The name does not signify its race: it is a homage to the perfection of the drawing of the Lascaux master. A soft black contour, at once distinct and vanishing, both contains and shapes the body’s mass. A short mane, like that of a circus horse; impetuous, thundering hooves. Ochre does not fill the body; the belly and legs are white.

I realize that all descriptions, all inventories are useless in the presence of this masterpiece, which displays such a blinding, obvious unity. Only poetry and fairy-tales possess the power of instant creation. One should say, “Once upon a time, there was a beautiful horse from Lascaux.”

How to reconcile this refined art with the brutal practices of the prehistoric hunters? How to consent to the arrows piercing

the flesh of an animal, an imaginary murder committed by the artist?

Before the Revolution, Siberian hunting tribes lived in conditions similar to those of the “reindeer” era. Lot-Falck in *Les rites de chasse chez les peuples sibériens* writes: “A hunter treated an animal as a creature at least equal to himself. Noting that an animal must hunt, like himself, in order to live, man thought that it had the same model of social organization. Man’s superiority was manifest in the field of technology through his use of tools. In the sphere of magic, the animal was attributed with equal powers. On the other hand, an animal is superior to man in one or many respects—its physical strength, agility, perfect hearing, and smell, all the virtues highly prized by hunters. In the spiritual realm animals were credited with even greater virtues—a closer contact with the divine and with the forces of nature which they embodied.” This is still just about comprehensible to modern man. The abysses of paleo-psychology begin with the bond between the killer and his victim: “The death of the animal depends, to some extent, on the animal itself; it must consent to be killed, it must enter into a relationship with its murderer. That is why the hunter cares for the animal and tries to establish close relations. If the reindeer does not love its hunter, it will not bow to its death.” So hypocrisy is our original sin and strength. Only insatiable, murderous love explains the charm of the Lascaux bestiary.

To the right of the room of the bulls, a narrow cat-like corridor leads to the part called the nave and apse. On the left wall a large black cow catches our attention with its perfect outline, and two mysterious yet distinct signs placed under its hooves. These are not the only signs before which we stand helpless.

The meaning of the arrows piercing the animals is clear, since the magical practice of “killing the image” was known to medieval witches, frequently performed in Renaissance courts and even preserved until our rational times. But what are those quadrangles with a colorful chessboard pattern under the hooves of the black cow? L’abbé Breuil[3], the pope of pre-historians and a prominent expert not only on the Lascaux

caves, saw in them signs of hunting clans, a remote heraldry. Another hypothesis put forward is that they are models of animal traps; another sees in them designs of huts. For Raymond Vaufrey, they were painted leather coats, similar to those still to be found in Rhodesia. Though these assumptions are plausible, none is certain. Also, we are unable to interpret other simple signs: dots, dashes, squares, and circles, and the geometric figures found in caves such as Castillo in Spain. Some scholars timidly suppose that these were the first attempts at writing. So only the concrete images speak to us. Amidst the raucous breathing of the Lascaux animals, the geometric signs are silent; and perhaps will remain silent for ever. Our knowledge about our ancestors is modulated by a violent cry and a deadly hush.

On the left side of the nave, there is a beautiful frieze of deer. The artist has depicted only the heads, necks, and antlers; they flow like a river towards the hunters hidden in the bush.

A composition which trivializes the violence of our contemporary masters: two soot-black bison with their rumps turned to each other. The one on the left displays raw flesh through a torn patch of skin. Heads raised, hides bristling, front hooves thrusting. The painting explodes with a dark, blind power. Even Goya's bullfights are but a vague echo of this passion.

The apse leads us towards a falling aperture, called a shaft, to a meeting with the ultimate mystery.

It is a scene, or rather a drama, and as becomes an ancient drama, it is played out between a limited number of protagonists: a bison pierced by a javelin, a man lying on the ground, a bird, and the faded contour of a departing rhinoceros. The bison is seen in profile, but its head is turned towards the spectator. Intestines spill from its gut. The man, his image simplified as in a child's drawing, has a bird's head with a straight beak, four-fingered hands thrown out and stiffly outstretched legs. The bird, as though cut from cardboard, is placed on a stick of straight line. The entire image is drawn with a thick, black line and filled with only the golden ochre of the background. It is distinguished from the paintings of the

hall of the bulls and the apse by its raw, almost clumsy facture treatment. It attracts the historian's attention not so much on artistic grounds as for its iconographic expressiveness.

Almost all Franco-Cantabrian art is non-narrative. To present a hunting scene one must introduce man's image. We do know some carvings of faces and human figures, but man is virtually absent from Paleolithic painting.

L'abbé Breuil viewed the scene in the shaft as a plaque commemorating a hunting fatality. The bison has killed the man, but the animal's lethal wound was probably inflicted by the rhinoceros who joined the fight rather than by the javelin thrown at its back. Perhaps the immense stomach wound was produced by a simple stone-catapult whose vague outline protrudes under the animal's legs. And finally, the stylized bird without beak and almost without legs is for Breuil a sort of funerary column such as the Alaskan Eskimos use to this day.

This is not the sole exegesis, and because it seemed too simple to the prehistorians, they gave free rein to their imaginations. One interpretation seems interesting and worth summarizing. Kirchner, a German anthropologist, boldly proposed that the scene did not depict hunting. The man on the ground had not died on an animal's horns, he was a shaman in an ecstatic trance. Breuil's interpretation did not account for the presence of the bird or the bird-shaped head of the prostrate man. These elements became the focus of Kirchner's theory, which was based on the analogy between the civilization of the hunting tribes in Siberia and the Paleolithic civilization, and referred to the ceremony of cow sacrifice described by Sieroszewski[4] in his work on the Yakuts. During this ritual three totems were indeed erected and crowned with figures resembling the bird from Lascaux. The Yakuts usually performed these rites in the presence of a shaman who would fall into a trance. Now we must explain the meaning of the bird in the ritual.

The shaman's task was to accompany the soul of the sacrificed animal to heaven. After an ecstatic dance, he collapsed onto the ground as if he were dead; so he had to employ an assisting bird spirit, in whose nature the shaman

participated, a fact emphasized by wearing a cloak of feathers and a bird mask.

Kirchner's hypothesis is very striking, but it does not explain the meaning of the rhinoceros, which undoubtedly belongs to the scene, withdrawing peacefully as if proud of the crime committed.

Yet another reason that this scene is important and unique: it is one of the first representations of man in Paleolithic art. What a striking difference in the treatment of human and animal forms. The bison is suggestive and specific; one can feel not only the substance of its flesh, but also the pathos of its agony. The small figure of the man is extremely simplified, a barely recognizable sign of a man: a protracted, rectangular trunk with sticks for limbs. It is as though the Aurignacian painter were ashamed of his body, longing for his forsaken animal family. Lascaux is the apotheosis of those creatures which evolution left in their immutable form.

Man destroyed the order of nature by his thought and labor. He sought to create a new order through an array of self-imposed prohibitions. He was ashamed of his face, a visible sign of difference. He often wore masks, animal masks, as if propitiating for his own treason. When he wanted to appear graceful and strong, he changed his dress and became a beast. He returned to his origins, joyfully submerged himself in the warm womb of nature.

In the Aurignacian epoch the images of man take the form of hybrids with the heads of birds, apes, and deer: for example, in the cave of Trois Frères a human figure is dressed in animal hide and antlers, with large arresting eyes, which is why prehistorians call him the "god of the cave" or "the wizard." One of the most beautiful etchings depicts a fabulous animal carnival. A crowd of horses, bucks, bison, and a dancing man with a bison's head who plays a musical instrument.

The idea of an absolute, mimetic animal representation, inseparable from the picture's magic function, was probably the reason the ancient painters began to use pigments. The ancient palette is simple and can be reduced to red and its derivatives, plus black and white. It seems that prehistoric man

was unresponsive to other colors, like the Bantu tribe today. Anyway, the old scriptures of humanity, Veda, Avesta[5], the Old Testament, the poems of Homer, are faithful to this limited perception of color.

There was a great demand for ochre. Prehistoric stores were found in the caves of Les Roches and Les Eyzies with traces of large-scale quarries in the Tertiary Sounds near Nantron. Pigments were formed from minerals: manganese was the base of black; ferrous oxides the base of red. Minerals were ground to powder on stone plates or animal bones like the buffalo shoulder-blades found in Pair-non-Pair. The coloring powder was stored in hollow bones or small sacks suspended from belts similar to those used by the Bushman artists[6] before their annihilation by the Boers.

Pulverized pigment was mixed with animal grease, marrow, or water. Contours were drawn with a stone point; and the paint was applied by finger, fur-brush, or twigs. Sometimes it was blown through a special pipe: perhaps the technique used in Lascaux where large surfaces are covered by a coat of uneven colors. This procedure gives the effect of soft outlines, a grainy surface, an organic texture.

The surprisingly skillful painting and drawing techniques of the Aurignacian, Solutrean, and Magdalenian periods have led prehistorians to speculate that art schools existed in those times, removed from our own by many millennia. This seems corroborated by the development of Paleolithic art from the simple outlines of hands in the caves of Castillo to the masterpieces of Altamira and Lascaux.

The chronology of Paleolithic art is difficult to determine; however, more reliable dating may be based on the evolution of tools. In this thin span of human history (thin only for us, because of the lack of written materials and the small number of remains for the vastness of the epoch) the clocks measure neither hours nor centuries but tens of thousands of years.

The early Paleolithic, the era of reindeer and rational man, lasted some fifteen to twenty-five thousand years, terminating in the fifteenth millennium before the Christian era. It is divided into three periods: Aurignacian, Solutrean, and

Magdalenian. The climate stabilized during that period, giving birth to Franco-Cantabrian civilization. The nightmare of glacial catastrophe—white ice masses moving in from the north, more devastating than volcanic lava—vanished. Yet this warming brought about the culture's downfall: by the end of the Magdalenian era, the reindeer had migrated to the north. Man remained alone, deserted by gods and animals.

What is the place of Lascaux in prehistory? We know that the cave was not decorated at a stroke and that it contains a palimpsest of paintings from different millennia. Basing his findings on an analysis of style, Breuil decided that the main paintings were made in the Aurignacian period. Their chief characteristic was a certain kind of perspective. It is obviously not a convergent perspective, which requires a knowledge of geometry, but rather a "twisted perspective." Animals are usually presented in profile while parts of their bodies—heads, ears, and legs—are turned towards the spectator. The bison's horns in the shaft scene have the shape of a slanting lyre.*

The story of the discovery. It is September, 1940. France has fallen to the Germans. The Battle of Britain is approaching its climax. Far away, in the margin of events, in a forest near Montignac a scene from a novel for adolescents is taking place, an adventure which was to give the world one of its greatest prehistoric finds.

No one knows when a storm overturned a tree, uncovering the hole which excited the imagination of eighteen-year-old Marcel Ravidat and his companions. The boys thought that it was the entrance to an underground passage that led to the ruins of a nearby castle. Journalists invented a dog that fell into the hole, becoming the de facto discoverer of Lascaux. It is more probable that Ravidat had the soul of an explorer, though he cared less for fame than for treasure.

The hole was eighty centimeters wide and seemed as deep. But a stone thrown into it took an unusually long time to reach the bottom. The boys enlarged the entrance. Ravidat was the first to enter the cave. Someone brought a lamp, and the paintings buried underground for twenty thousand years were

revealed to human eyes. “Our joy was unbounded. We performed a wild war dance.”

Fortunately the youths did not explore the caves on their own but called their teacher, M. Laval, who in turn summoned Breuil, who lived in the vicinity at the time and arrived nine days after the discovery. The academic world learned of the discovery only five years later, at the end of the war.

The boys deserve, if not a monument, at least a plaque no smaller than the one dedicated to Marie Martel, midwife and *officier d’Académie*. Their hometown Montignac became famous. And fame brought substantial profits. The town got improved bus connections, and a variety of cafés, with names like “The Bull,” “The Bison,” and “The Quaternary” multiplied, and more than twenty families now live on the sale of souvenirs. Perhaps Ravidat will open a restaurant and as an old man will sit around the fireplace telling the story of his discovery to the tourists; or he will get a degree in archeology. It is improbable that he will ever accomplish anything to rival this. To tell the truth, no one has heard of him since.

Less than a kilometer from the cave, a private prehistorical enterprise was built. The owners of a nearby meadow discovered something that resembled an entrance to another cave and found some insignificant fossils. They built a hut to contain these “exhibits” and in order to make the museum appear scholarly, decorated the walls with charts from which one can learn that there were four glaciations: Günz, Mindel, Riss, and Würm. A shrewd peasant, smelling of sheep’s milk cheese, is ready to provide further information on paleontology for one franc.

Because we live in doubting times, the authenticity of the cave paintings was questioned. It began in 1879 with the discovery in Altamira by Marcellino de Sautuola. The Jesuits were suspected of forging the paintings and bringing them to the attention of scientists, waiting for a debate to break out. Then they would reveal the deception to discredit the claims of the archeologists who were threatening to extend man’s knowledge beyond biblical interpretation. It took scientists

twenty years after the discovery to establish the authenticity of Altamira.

Their skepticism is quite understandable if we recall the famous affair of the Piltdown skull[7], on which the most prominent archeologists wrote for twenty years until it turned out to be a forgery. A forgery of genius, it was said, because it was prepared meticulously by someone who had access to collections of similar finds and knew the secrets of the laboratory.

The processes that can be applied to a piece of bone to render it "Paleolithic" are much simpler than painting enormous cave surfaces. The latter requires a team possessing both knowledge and extraordinary artistic talent. Besides, it would be an endeavor whose cost was utterly disproportionate to all profit.

What provokes most suspicion in the mind of the layman is that some reproductions, including those published soon after the discovery, differ in detail from the paintings to be seen in the grottoes. It is suspected that some details deemed essential by prehistorians were added. In magazine reproductions of the shaft scene, the prostrate man has no phallus. This fragment was simply obliterated by editors mindful of their readers' moral sensibility. Since many Paleolithic statuettes and etchings are connected with fertility rites and emphasize and enlarge the genitalia, the whole affair is cleared up.

While visiting the Lascaux caves, I myself felt skeptical for a moment about the astonishing freshness of color and the perfect condition of the relics. But the explanation is simple. For thousands of years the caves were covered by earth so they remained in stable physical conditions. The humidity produced a translucent coat of salt that preserved the painted surfaces like varnish.

In the summer of 1952, while visiting the caves of Pech-Merle, the poet André Breton decided to solve the problem of authenticity by a simple experiment. He scratched a painting and, seeing that color came away on his finger, resolved that the work was a recent forgery. He was fined (for scratching, not for his beliefs), but the affair did not end there. The Societé

des Gens de Lettres called for an investigation into the authenticity of the painted caves. L'abbé Breuil regarded this request as inadmissable in his report to the high commission for historical monuments. The method of scratching did not enrich the arsenal of archeological research on prehistoric art.

I RETURNED FROM LASCAUX by the same road I arrived. Though I had stared into what some call the abyss of history, I did not feel I was returning from another world. Never before had I felt a stronger or more reassuring conviction: I am a citizen of the earth, an inheritor not only of the Greeks and Romans but of almost the whole of infinity.

This is precisely human pride and a faith cast into the vastness of the heavens, space, and time: "Poor bodies that perish without a trace, let humanity be nothing to you; from the earth with its traces of the Aurignacian half-beast and traces of vanished kingdoms, feeble hands dig up images which, whether evoking indifference or understanding, testify equally to your dignity. No greatness can be separated from its support. The rest are passive creatures and thoughtless worms."

The road opened to the Greek temples and Gothic stained glass. I walked towards them feeling the warm touch of the Lascaux painter on my palm.

AMONG THE DORIANS

The only harmony that gives the soul a perfect[1]
tranquility is the harmony of the Dorians.
ARISTOTLE

I TRIED TO CONVINCE Naples of the artistic merits of silence. In vain. Some aesthetics are based on noise. So I used a terrorist argument: “Listen, Naples, Vesuvius never sleeps. If a tremor should foretell disaster, no one would even hear it. Remember Pompeii’s fate. Of course, I don’t demand that you imitate its grave peace, but observe a little moderation, as Pericles recommended. I mention this name not without reason. For you border Magna Graecia.”

There were only two relatively quiet places: the Museo Capo di Monte and the elevator at the Albergo Fiore. The museum is situated in a large park on a hill, where the town’s murmur resonates like the voice of an old record.

I came to a halt most frequently at Mantegna’s portrait of young Francesco Gonzaga. The boy is dressed in a pale-pink *lucco* and cap, from which a fringe of evenly cropped locks protrudes. Maturity and adolescence contend for possession of his face. A sharp eye, a strong masculine nose, and a childish, puffy mouth. The background is a magnificent deep green, alluring like water under a bridge.

The elevator at the Albergo Fiore was also a work of art. Spacious as a bourgeois sitting-room with intricate golden ornaments, a mirror and a settee, upholstered in red plush, of

course. The salon rises slowly, sighing all the way for the nineteenth century.

I stayed at the Albergo for patriotic reasons (the owner was a compatriot) and ulterior motives (it was cheap). *Signor* Kowalczyk had fair hair and an open Slavonic face. At night we talked over wine about the complexities of the war, the vices of Italians, the merits of the Poles, and the influence of pasta on the soul. When on the first day I confessed to him my dream of visiting Sicily, *Signor* Kowalczyk reached into his desk drawer and generously handed me an unused train ticket to Paestum which had been left by a tourist.

Paestum is not Syracuse, but it is still Magna Graecia. Without much regret I abandoned the possibility of visiting the Blue Grotto. I knew Capri, that "Island of Lovers," quite well from a charming pre-war song; and I did not want to spoil my sense of it by confronting my ideal with reality. As it turned out, Paestum would have been worth the pilgrimage even on foot.

The Sunday train reaches Paestum almost empty. Most tourists get off between Sorrento and Salerno where they are greeted by small carts drawn by donkeys festooned with flowers.

From the station you follow a straight, cypress-lined road to the Gate of Mermaids, where you enter a town inhabited by high grass and stone. The Greek colonies in Italy were by no means peaceful oases. The mighty wall, in places seven meters thick, offers immediate evidence of this. From their stony, unyielding homeland the Greeks crossed "the wine-dark sea" on their quick ships to a country warmed by the fires of many generations. Ancient necropolises dating back to Paleolithic times attest to their presence.

The greatest period of Greek colonization occurred between the eighth and sixth centuries B.C.E. It was purely economic, thus differing from the previous wave of Greek expansion which reached the coasts of Asia Minor some centuries earlier and had a political basis—the pressure of the Dorians arriving from the north.

The first Greek conquests were unsystematic, piratical looting raids. A legend soon followed, claiming the lands before the first Greek cities had been built on them. For Homer the territories west of the Ionian Sea had been the domain of fable. But already poets were busy populating the foreign rivers, sea-coasts, caves and islands with Greek deities, mermaids, and heroes.

Odysseus, razer of cities was not a colonizer but a characteristic representative of the precolonial epoch. On his return from Troy, when he razed Ismarus, the city of the Ciconians, he was only interested in ship-worthy spoils—female slaves and treasure. No exotic charms could hold up his stubborn voyage to his stony homeland. The poetry of Hesiod shows even more clearly the attitude of the archaic Greeks, those noblemen tied to the soil, for whom the songs of wandering poets were often substitutes for travel.

Some ancient authors thought that the phenomenon of colonization was rooted in personal causes: a family quarrel or contested inheritance. One should not reject this explanation which points to underlying social transformations, the loosening of the strong tribal bonds prevalent during the time of the Trojan expedition. Thucydides and Plato give another interpretation that is both simple and convincing: lack of land. Sicily and the southern part of the Apennine Peninsula posed tempting prospects for agrarian and mercantile colonization.

However, these lands were not a no-man's land. The Greeks won them from the Barbarians by sleight of hand or by force, with less cruelty than the Romans (those Prussians of the ancient world), though not without bloodshed. They were primarily concerned in securing coasts for their ports. Local populations sought shelter in the mountains, and observed the conquerors' fat city with loathing. Cicero evocatively described the coastline as an ornamental band sewn on to the broad cloth of semi-barbarians, a golden band frequently stained with blood.

Poseidonia (Paestum in Latin) was founded in the middle of the seventh century B.C.E. by the Dorians who had been expelled from Sybaris by the Achaeans. The Greek settlements

in Italy fought for hegemony as ruthlessly as in Greece itself. Attempts were made to unify southern Italy through a league of towns. This idea, as scholars have inferred from excavated coins, was to be furthered by the Pythagoreans from Croton[2]. It was they who turned the powerful city of Sybaris which at its peak counted one hundred thousand inhabitants, into a heap of rubble. The alliance of the Poseidonians with the victors was highly rewarded. Their wealth was based on the trade in corn and oil. Before too long, ten temples graced the town.

The temples were not just manifestations of a religious spirit or, as is ceaselessly repeated, the celebrated Greek love of beauty. Art, especially architecture, played an important role in the colonies by defining Greek identity against the surrounding peoples. A Greek temple on a hill was like a banner hoisted over a conquered land.

Greek civilization in Italy reached its zenith during the Periclean period in the sixth and fifth centuries B.C.E. The merchant towns became havens for scholars, poets, and philosophers; the latter gained considerable political influence. Both Croton and Metapontum[3] were ruled by the Pythagoreans. Those who have read Plato's *Republic* will not be surprised by the popular rebellion of circa 450 B.C. against the philosophers who used the worship of numbers as a pretext for ordering the compulsory registration of men, and used the occasion to imprison all those suspected of anti-Pythagorean sentiments. An ordinary citizen becomes impatient with abstraction; he prefers dull, bureaucratic corruption to sages.

Not far from Paestum was Elea, home of Parmenides' philosophical school founded at the turn of the sixth century B.C. It succeeded the Ionian school as the second important link in Greek thought. Pre-classical Greek philosophy is from the colonies.

Perhaps it is naïve, though not implausible, to claim that the perpetual state of danger in the Greek *polis* caused the Eleans to preach the consolatory doctrine of the immutability of the world, the constancy of existence. But the still Eleatic arrow of Zeno was not proven by history.

Poseidonia was captured in 400 B.C.E. by the Lucanians from the surrounding mountains. Seventy years later, they were slaughtered by King Alexander of Epirus, the nephew of Alexander the Great, in a gesture of Hellenistic solidarity. After his death, the Lucanians regained control. Their occupation must have been brutal as even speaking Greek was forbidden.

The new liberators were the Romans, with whom the Greeks could easily consort. Paestum became a Roman colony supplying Rome with ships and crews. When the Republic was troubled (after the battle of Cannae[4]), the Poseidonians offered all the golden urns from their temples to aid the war. The Romans graciously refused and rewarded the colony with the privilege of minting its own coin.

Finally the god of the sea, Paestum's patron, admonished his worshippers by raising the coastline. The local river, Silarus, lost its outlet and dissipated into marshland. Strabo complains about the bad air in the neighborhood. What the barbarians had been unable to do was achieved by malaria.

In the Middle Ages Paestum had become a caricature of a city, inhabited by a small Christian community housed in clumsy little dwellings built of ancient rubble clinging to the old temple of Demeter, which had been transformed into a church. In the eleventh century the decimated dwellers of the malarial city yielded to the pressure of the Saracens, fleeing eastward by the same path taken by the Lucanians in their flight from the Greeks.

In Capaccio Vecchio, where the Poseidonians found shelter, a church was erected, dedicated to the Madonna of the Pomegranate. The Madonna has the face of Hera. In May and August the inhabitants of the area form a solemn procession carrying to the church little barges decorated with flowers and candles, which resemble the Greek offerings to Hera of Argos twenty-six centuries ago.

In the middle of the eighteenth century, a road was laid in the vicinity of by then non-existent Paestum. Three Doric temples were discovered by accident, one of them among the best-preserved in the world: the Basilica, the Temple of

Poseidon, and the Temple of Demeter. They were filled with a crowd of pious oaks.

A meal on the veranda of a modest trattoria, face to face with the art of the Dorians. One must dine with moderation, unhomerically, not to embarrass them. No hunks of meat or craters of wine. A bowl of salad with garlic will suffice, accompanied by bread, cheese, and a quarter liter of wine. The wine resembles Vesuvian Gragnano, but unfortunately it is a rather poor relative of this noble vine. Instead of an *aoidos*[5], a Neapolitan tenor on the radio lures his beloved to Sorrento.

So I see them for the first time in real life, with my own eyes. In a moment I can go there and put my face to the stones to test their smell, pass my hand along the columns' fluting. One must free oneself: forget all the photographs, diagrams, guides seen, all the lectures on the immaculate purity and loftiness of the Greeks.

My first impression borders on disappointment: the Greek temples are smaller, lower than I expected. They stand on a flat plain under an immense sky, which flattens them even more. An exceptional topographical situation, as the majority of sacred buildings were erected on hills and absorbed the lines of the mountain landscape, which gave them wings.

In Paestum, where nature refused to assist, one may study the Dorians in a cool, dispassionate manner. It is the proper approach for this most masculine architectural style, whose austerity is like the history of its northern creators. Thickset, solid, and athletic as befits an age of heroes chasing game with a club. The lines of the columns in particular display a clear musculature. The broad capital strains under the architraves' weight.

The Basilica is Paestum's oldest building, founded in the middle of the sixth century B.C.E. It was first thought to be a public building because its façade has an uneven number of columns, unknown in Greek temples. Its distinct *entasis*, the thickened middle section of the column, is the most visible evidence of its archaic age. It is covered with a mighty *echinus* shaped like a flattened pillow. The upper section of the column is slender in comparison to the base, which counters the

impression of heaviness and the density of the vertical elements.

The delicate wreath of leaves between the stem and the capital is another detail—rare in Greek temples—which art historians claim to be of Mycenaean origin.

The columns, massive as the bodies of Titans, no longer support the roof, only the remains of the architrave and frieze. Wind and storms have severed the top of the Basilica. Fragments of triglyph and a moving trace of the anonymous builders: a U-shaped hollow made by a rope used to lift the sandstone.

To enter one must mount three steps intended for giants rather than people. Not everything in Greek art obeys human scale.

The temple's interior lay-out is simple. The central area is an enclosed, rectangular chamber—called *naos*—dark as a ship's hold. Once it accommodated a statue of the god with his thunderbolt at rest. It is a place for priests rather than worshippers, the distant echo of a subterranean cave.

The altars at the front of the temple indicate that sacrifices were celebrated outside. The peristyle and *pronaos* were too narrow for mass processions. For the majority of believers a temple was to be viewed from outside, and so Greek architecture concentrated on height, the spacing of columns, the proportions of the stone mass and placement of ornaments, rather than on new interior designs.

To the south of the basilica stands one of the most beautifully preserved Doric temples. Though originally ascribed to Poseidon, re-examination of its cult objects have reclaimed the temple for the wife of Zeus, Hera of Argos. Once thought to be the oldest sacred edifice in Paestum, it is now seen as the youngest of the preserved Doric temples of Poseidonia—a classic example of Doric style—built around 450 B.C.E., only several years earlier than the Athenian Parthenon.

The temple's mass is compact, yet lighter than in archaic structures. Its proportions are perfectly balanced; the separate

elements form a clear, logical whole. The Dorian artist worked in both stone and the empty spaces between the columns, shaping air and light in an Orphic text.

The horizontal lines are not perfectly parallel. Optical correction (an invention of the Parthenon's architect, Ictinus of Miletus) was used to bend the straight lines inward, causing an effect of compression. The Dorian architects knew that to the viewer the top portion of the vertical columns would create an impression of a widening of the upward lines, a rending asunder of the temple. Hence, the external columns incline inwards. The temple of Hera departs from this rule through what a contemporary painter would call its facture treatment. The exterior columns are vertical, but their fluting leads the eye to produce the effect of an inward bend.

Despite these architectural subtleties, Hera of Argos has the ponderousness and austere necessity of old Doric buildings though it belongs to the classical era. The ratio of the columns' diameter to their height is 1:5. The top sections of the capitals, the square abaci, almost touch. They are by no means a decorative element, for they actually support the triangular gable of the temple which is half the column's height.

The temple of Demeter is at the southern edge of the town's sacred zone. In fact, it was devoted to Athena. This was revealed by the recent unearthing of statuettes and an inscription in archaic Latin: *Menerva*. Constructed at the end of the sixth century B.C.E., its columns have the distinct *entasis* and flattened *echinus* of the Basilica. Apparently a pure example of Doric art.

Yet a pure architectural order rarely occurs outside of textbooks. Two Ionian capitals were recently unearthed in the temple of Demeter. Some art historians place the two styles in sharp opposition, as creations of divergent tribes and mentalities. The Doric columns are said to be masculine, heavy, expressing power, while the Ionian supports are feminine, full of Asiatic grace and lightness. In fact there was a mutual influence of styles—differences were less emphatic than the classifiers would like.

Paestum's three temples represent the three epochs of the Doric order: the Basilica is archaic; Demeter covers the transitional period; Hera evinces the mature Doric style. For this alone, Paestum is worth visiting as one of the most important and instructive complexes of ancient architecture.

Noon: the asphodels, cypresses, oleanders stand motionless. A steamy silence shot through with crickets. The sacrifice of fragrances rises endlessly from earth to heaven. I sit inside the temple and watch the erring of shadows. It is not an accidental, melancholy wandering of darkness but a precise movement of lines dissecting the right angle. It suggests that Greek architecture originated in the sun.

It is more than probable that Greek architects knew the art of measuring with shadow. The north-south axis was marked by the shortest shadow cast by the sun at its zenith. The problem was to find a way to trace the perpendicular to that shadow and thus to find the basic axis, the holy orientation: east-west.

Legend attributes this invention to Pythagoras, emphasizing its importance with a tribute of a hundred slain oxen. The solution was brilliantly simple. In a right-angle triangle with a ratio of 3:4:5, the square on the hypotenuse equals the sum of the squares on the other two sides. This theorem, the torment of schoolchildren up to today, had immense practical consequences. If a rope marked with this ratio were stretched between three vertices so that the shorter side of the triangle overlapped the noon shadow, the perpendicular would mark the east-west direction. This triangle, called Pythagorean, was used to delimit the height and the spacing of columns.

It is not without significance that this triangle seemed to fall from the heavens, and therefore had a cosmic dimension. The architects of the Doric temples were less concerned with beauty than with chiselling the world's order into stone. Like Heraclitus and Parmenides they were prophets of the Logos.

The beginnings of the Doric style are unclear. Vitruvius[6], the architect of the emperor Augustus, probably relying on Greek tradition, provides a fairy-tale genesis which he traces back to Dorus, the son of Hellen and the nymph Orseis who

once ruled Achaia and the entire Peloponnese. He asserts that the first builders did not know the correct proportions and "searched for such rules that would make columns beautiful and able to support great weights." They measured a man's footprint and compared it to his height. Finding that a foot equalled one-sixth of a man's height, they applied this ratio to a column with its capital. In this manner, Doric columns began to reflect in architecture the power and beauty of a masculine body.

The northern invaders, the Dorians, used the experience of the peoples they conquered, the Mycenaeans and the Cretans. Through our deepening knowledge of archaeology and history, we have replaced the popular phrase "the Greek miracle" with a search for the rungs of evolution, the struggles and influences of many centuries. The basic plan of a Doric temple in all likelihood descends from the megaron, the central chamber of a Mycenaean palace. On the other hand it is the transposition of age-old wood building techniques to stone, as evidenced in such architectural details as the triglyph—which was once the carved fore-section of a roof beam. Of course, wooden structures have vanished along with three centuries of experiments.

The great epoch of stone construction from the beginning of the seventh century B.C.E. developed only due to structural changes in the economy and society. The Greek polis housed not only rich merchants, local landowners, but also impoverished masses and slaves who served as the main labor force in the quarries. From second-hand descriptions of working conditions at the gold and silver mines in Egypt and Spain, one may imagine something vividly reminiscent of forced labor camps. We should not fail to remember, says a British scholar, "the blood and tears shed over the raw materials of Greek art." It has been suggested that these realities prompted the two worlds of Plato's cave, and Tartarus and the sphere of the clear heavens where souls rid of their bodies reach a state of blessed peace.

A stone was not just a material, it possessed a symbolic meaning, was a venerated object as well as a divining tool. There was an intimate bond between stone and man.

Promethean legend tells us that stones were blood relatives of men. They even retained the scent of the human body. Man and stone represent two cosmic powers, the movement of gravity and grace. A rough stone falls from the sky. Submitted to an architect's toil, to the suffering of number and measure, it soars to the dwelling of the gods.

The following Orphic text leaves no doubt on this subject. It has a poetic beauty that makes it worth quoting:

The sun gave him a stone
capable of speech and truth
so people called it a creature of the mountains

It was hard strong black and dense
its sides were marked
with streaks resembling wrinkles

So he washed the wise stone in a living spring
clothed it in pure linen
fed it like a small child
made offerings as to a god

With powerful hymns he kindled life in it

Then he lit a lamp in his clean house
rocked it in his arms and held it up
like a mother embracing a son

You who want to hear a god's voice

do the same

ask him about your future

for he will tell you everything in truth

A stone, excavated by prisoners of war, was dried in the sun, for water—as Heraclitus says—is the death of the soul. It was then taken to the building-site where the most difficult art of stone-cutting commenced. It was called the secret of architecture, and the Greeks were its peerless masters. Since no liquid mortar was used, the contacting surfaces had to fit perfectly. Even today the temples appear to be chiselled from a single stone. A balanced construction necessitated the knowledge of weights and the resistance of materials. The heaviest stones supplied the foundation while the hardest occupied the building's upper reaches. The period of construction was comparatively short. Temples were erected almost at one stroke. Additions or corrections were rare.

The word "ruin" does not apply to a Greek temple. Even the most decayed are not assemblages of crippled fragments, a confused heap of stones. Even the half-buried drum of a column or a separated capital have the completeness of a finished sculpture.

The beauty of classical architecture can be expressed in numbers and the proportions of particular elements as they relate to each other and to the whole. Greek temples live under the golden sun of geometry. Mathematical precision carries these works like ships over the fluctuations of time and taste. With a slight twist of Kant's view of geometry[7], one could say that Greek art is apodictic, an imperative of our consciousness.

Symmetry, understood as both an aesthetic rule and as an expression of the order of the universe (and may we not say the same of the symmetrical fates in ancient tragedy), is based on a module reproduced in all units of the construction. "Symmetry originates in proportion, and the proportion of a

building means measuring its elements as well as the whole according to one fixed module", says Vitruvius, with Roman simplicity. In reality the matter is far from simple.

It is debatable whether the Doric temple's module was its triglyph or the radius of its column. Some theoreticians see the prime proportion as the ratio of a column's height to the entablature which contains the frieze, cornice, and architrave. The difficulty resides in the fact that architects working within the same order express this relation in different proportions. Vitruvius claims that the essence of Ionian style is a 1:6 ratio, while Alberti[8] draws a 1:3.9 proportion for the same style. Moreover, an analysis of the buildings shows that theory did not coincide with practice.

One can explain that all values and measures were estimations due to the imperfection of tools and resistance of materials, but this does not clarify all the questions.

The search for an absolute canon, a unique numerical key to the structures of a given order, is an insipid academic game detached from reality and history. The orders evolved. This is clearly seen in Paestum when one compares the archaic Basilica with the mature Doric style of the temple of Hera. The height of the columns progresses from eight modules in the primitive order to eleven and later thirteen.

The quest for linear as opposed to angular proportions was another important error of the academic researchers, who torment defenseless blueprints with their rulers and triangles. They did not take into account either the height of buildings or the point from which they were viewed. Thus the theory of an angular denominator applied to Greek architecture clears up many misunderstandings and helps us to see the real significance of a canon in art. Canons were changeable values which varied according to the temple's size. The ratio of entablature to column corresponded to the height and distance at which the building was to be viewed. Paestum's sacred edifices were situated in its center and were viewed from a slight distance, which explains among other things the powerful entablature of the temple of Hera.

And so Greek art is a synthesis of reason and vision, geometry and the laws of the eye. This is also manifested in departures from the canon. Where a geometrician would draw a straight line, the Greeks introduce barely perceptible horizontal and vertical curves: the inclination of the temple's base, the stylobate, and the inward bend of the corner columns. This aesthetic retouching gave a building its vitality—a truth utterly neglected by its classicist imitators. The Madeleine in Paris and Soufflot's Pantheon compared to their original inspirations are like birds from an ornithological encyclopedia compared to birds in flight.

One might ask why the Doric, to our sense the most perfect of architectural orders, yielded to other styles. A Renaissance theorist explains: "Some ancient architects claimed that constructing temples in the Doric order should be abandoned since the style had wrong and improper proportions." Later there were wide-spread discussions about triglyph spacing—so that they were placed over each column and interkolumnium, on the axis of column and interkolumnium, or at the corners of the frieze—though the problem was ornamental rather than structural. It was a sign that temples had ceased to be the sites of ritual. They became town decorations.

Doric art was linked more profoundly and strongly with religion than later architectural orders of Antiquity. It was visible even in its materials. The marble of the Ionian and Corinthian styles lent chill, stiffness, and pomp: the graceful gods lost their power. It was significant whether the offering to Athena was made in gold and ivory or in rough stone. For the Dorians this goddess was a nomadic princess, a blue-eyed girl with the muscles of an ephebe who could tame wild horses. Dionysus, once the patron of dark forces and orgies, changed into a jovial, bearded drunkard.

To reconstruct a Doric temple fully one should paint it in bright reds, blues, and ochre. The most ruthless restorer would wince at such an ordeal. We wish to see the Greeks washed by the rains, white, devoid of passion and cruelty.

For a complete reconstruction one must also recreate what went on in front of the temple. What is a temple without

ritual? The skin torn off a snake, the mere surface of the mystery.

At dawn, when the deities of the heavens were worshipped, or at sunset or nighttime, when subterranean powers were the object of the cult, a procession headed by a priest approached the altar in front of the temple

"…Nestor, the aged lord of chariots[9], washed his hands, handed out barley, and praying long to Athene, cut the hair from an animal's head and threw it in the fire. Then the others at prayer threw the crushed barley grains before them. Suddenly the son of Nestor, the manly Thrasymedes, stepped forward and struck a blow; the axe cut the sinews of the neck and stunned the heifer. At this the daughters and sons sang out…

"Then they raised the animal's head and held it far from the earth with its wide roads. Prince Peisistratus cut the throat; red blood gushed out, and the breath flew from the bones."

So it was. Now excursions linger and a guide's passionless voice gives the temple's dimensions with an accountant's accuracy, providing the number of missing columns as if to apologize for the ruin. He points toward the altar, but this forsaken stone stirs no emotions. If the tourists had any imagination, instead of clicking their Kodaks, they would bring an ox and slaughter it in front of the altar.

A brief bus trip gives absolutely no sense of what a Greek temple is. One must spend at least a whole day in the ruins to understand the life of stones in the sun. They change with the time of day and year. In the morning the Paestum limestone is gray, at noon—honey, with the sunset—scarlet. I touch it and feel the warmth of human flesh. Green lizards run across it like shivers.

The day declines. The sky is bronze. The golden chariot of Helios rolls down to the sea. At this hour, Homer says, "all paths darken." In front of Hera's temple the roses Virgil sang of—Biferi rosaria Paesti—decant[10] their fragrance. The columns drink the sunset's living fire. Soon they will stand in the darkening air like a charred forest.

ARLES

for Mateusz

THOUSANDS OF COLORFUL lanterns hanging over the streets cast a clownish hue on the faces of the people milling around. The open doors and windows are full of music. The squares spin like carousels. As if you have stepped into the middle of a huge feast. That is how Arles seemed to me on the night I arrived.

I had rented a room at the top of a hotel which faced the Musée Réattu in a street narrow and deep as a well. I could not sleep. It wasn't the voices, but rather the town's penetrating vibration.

I walked the boulevards towards the Rhône. "Oh, quick river, issuing from the Alps, rolling the nights and days alongside you, my desires are where nature leads you, where love leads me," sang Petrarch. The Rhône is in fact powerful, dark and heavy like a buffalo. A bright Provençal night, cool, though with a hidden heat at its apex.

I return to the town center following traces of voices and music. How to describe a town that is not of stone but of flesh? It has a warm, moist skin and the pulse of a snared animal.

I drink Côte du Rhône at the Café de l'Alcazar. Only the color reproduction above the bar reminds me, that this was the subject of Van Gogh's famous *Le café de nuit* and that he himself lived here in 1888, having arrived in Provence to capture a blue deeper than the sky and a yellow more dazzling

than the sun. Do they remember him here? Is there anyone alive who saw him in the flesh?

The bartender informs me reluctantly that sure, there is one *pauvre vieillard* who can tell you something about Van Gogh. But he is not here at the moment; he usually comes in the morning and likes American cigarettes.

So I started my sojourn not with the Greeks and Romans, but with the *fin de siècle*.

The following day I was shown the old man at the Café de l'Alcazar. He was dozing over a glass of wine, propped on a cane, his chin resting on his clasped hands.

"They tell me you knew Van Gogh."

"I did. Who are you? A student, a journalist?"

"A student."

I see that I have blundered. The old man closes his eyes and loses interest. So I reach for the American cigarettes. The bait works. The man inhales with relish, empties his glass and looks at me attentively.

"You are interested in Van Gogh?"

"Very much."

"Why?"

"He was a great painter."

"So they say. I haven't seen any of his pictures."

His bony finger taps the empty glass. I fill it obediently.

"Well then. Van Gogh. He is dead."

"But you knew him."

"No one knew him. He lived alone, like a dog. People were afraid of him."

"Why?"

"He ran around the fields with these huge canvases. Boys used to throw stones at him. I didn't. I was too small. Three or four."

“So you didn’t like him?”

“He was very funny. His hair was like a carrot.”

The old man suddenly bursts out laughing. He laughs long, heartily and with satisfaction.

“He was a very funny man. *Il était drôle.* His hair was like a carrot. I remember it well. You could see it a long way off.”

That is more or less the sum of the little man’s memories of the prophet.

I dined in a small restaurant off the Place de la République. The Provençal kitchen, which I got to know on a limited scale and in third-rate places, is magnificent. First comes a tin tray divided into compartments with hors d’oeuvres: green and black olives, pickled onions, endives, and spicy potatoes. Then a delicious fish soup, cousin of the queen of soups—the *bouillabaisse* of Marseilles, in simple words, a fish bouillon enhanced with garlic and spices. Sirloin fillet baked in pepper. Rice from the neighboring Carmargue. Wine and cheese.

More reproductions of Van Goghs on the wall: *Le Pont-levis, Les oliviers, Le facteur Roulin.* “A good fellow,” wrote the painter, “since he refused payment, we ate and drank together, which was more expensive…But that was nothing since he posed very well.”

The owner did not know the master, but he remembers a family story often told by his mother. One afternoon this crazy painter rushed into their vineyard shouting for them to buy a painting. They barely managed to shove him out of the gate. “He wanted only fifty francs,” the patron concludes with a bottomless melancholy.

During his stay in Arles and nearby St Rémy, Van Gogh completed hundreds of paintings and drawings. None remain in the city, whose citizens petitioned the authorities to place him in an asylum. The document was published in the local newspaper and may be seen in the Arlaten Museum, to the eternal disgrace of its authors. The grandsons would easily excuse their grandfathers’ cruelty, but not the fact that they let

slip through their fingers the fortune now represented by the slightest sketch signed “Vincent.”

Time to start my more methodical sightseeing.

The fertile Rhône valley has attracted colonizers from time immemorial. The first to come were the Greeks, who founded Marseilles in the sixth century B.C.E. From its strategic and mercantile site in the Rhône delta, Arles began as a small trading post within that powerful Greek colony. Not surprisingly, few remains have survived.

The real growth of Arles and of the whole of Provence came in Roman times. The town was called Arelate and was planned with real Roman panache and urbanist talent. Its rapid development began when Marseilles, allied with Pompey, rebelled against Julius Caesar. The city was stormed in 49 B.C. with the aid of war ships built in the shipyards of Arelate.

New colonists came to Arles: the poor citizens of Latium and Campania, and the veterans of the VI Legion[1]. Hence the official, rather long name of the city: Colonia Julia Arelatensium Sextanorum. Perfect roads, mighty aqueducts, and bridges bound the conquered land into one administrative and political organism. After the cruelties of the conquest, the bounty of a new civilization descended upon Provence.

The cult of the good emperor Augustus is still alive on the banks of the Rhône, and people speak of him with as much affection as my Galician grandparents used to speak of Franz Joseph. The emperor’s beautiful head in the Arles collection of stone carvings is full of energy and gentleness. This sculpted portrait presents the young ruler with a beard worn like a black mourning band, commemorating his adopted father, the divine Julius.

The pagan sculpture collection is modest. It holds no masterpieces, nor even outstanding works like the Venus of Arles, a copy of Praxiteles’ statue found among the ruins of a theater in the middle of the seventeenth century and offered to Louis XIV. Some heads, sarcophagi, fragments of bas-reliefs, two charming dancers in flowing robes in which the wind has petrified. The best sculptures still harbor the Hellenic tradition,

but many bear the stamp of a somewhat provincial, lumpish Gallo-Roman craft. Here one has the opportunity—not available in collections of masterpieces—of observing mediocre art, that semi-artistic handicraft, which, though void of genius, is solid and centuries later will flower as Romanesque sculpture.

The clock strikes noon. The keeper closes the *lapidarium*, comes up to me, and in a conspirational whisper offers to show me something that is not yet available to the public, but should impress me more than all the sculptures on display. I expect a newly-discovered Venus. We descend the winding stairs to the cellars. The torch lights up a wide vaulted stone corridor split by a low portico. It looks like a casemate or an entrance to an underground temple.

In fact it is a Roman food-store: Arles was both a mercantile and a military settlement. The underground storage-room is impressive. To dazzle me further, the keeper throws in some information about the disposition of particular products. “Here, where it was dry, they kept grain. In the middle, where the temperature was stable, casks of wine. Cheese ripened down there.” I don’t know how accurate this information is, but this simple man’s enthusiasm for Roman housekeeping is so great that I agree without protest. Now I know what excites the imagination of the descendants of the Gallic tribes. Not triumphal arches or emperors’ heads but aqueducts and granaries.

“And don’t forget to visit Barbegal[2],” says the keeper in parting. “It’s a few steps from the town. Within walking distance.”

On a slope—what appear to be the remains of huge steps leading toward a non-existent temple of giants. Yet there is nothing sacred in the ruins, just an ingenius watermill with eight levels with water forming an artificial waterfall which moved the paddle wheels. In spite of its ordinary function, the structure is considered one of the most interesting artifacts of Roman stone architecture.

The most monumental memento left by the Romans is the amphitheater.

It was built on a hill. Two floors of mighty arches with Doric pilasters at the bottom and Corinthian columns at the top. A bare construction of Cyclopean boulders. No trace of "lightness and charm," as a naive admirer of the Romans wrote. A place just right for gladiators and amateurs of strong emotions.

I am shown around by an invalid who lost a leg in the First World War. It is late autumn and tourists are scarce. He has just closed his ticket office and wants to chat with someone.

"The old days were better. I lost my leg on the fields of Champagne, and what's my compensation? A miserable job. Under the Romans I would have had a house of my own, and a vineyard, a piece of land, and free tickets to the circus."

"But in that circus people were torn apart by wild animals." I try to spoil his pastoral image.

"Maybe somewhere else, but not in Arles. All sorts of professors came here and didn't find a single human bone. Not one."

All right, all right then. Sleep quietly, old veteran, who would so lightheartedly trade Foch[3] for Julius Caesar and de Gaulle for Augustus. I did not expect that the Romans, who for me are "flat like a flower in a book," could still command such vivid human emotions.

The amphitheater's walls were so thick that during the barbarian raids the construction was turned into a fortress. Inside, streets were laid, with a church and some two hundred houses. This strange hybrid remained till the seventeenth century. Now the houses have vanished without a trace; the immense oval of the arena is covered with yellow sand. On this sand, in dazzling sunlight, I saw a bullfight. The famous Antonio Ordofiez "worked" with the bull in a cowardly and graceless manner. Thirty thousand spectators, that incorruptible judge of caesars and games, howled long, loudly, and with contempt.

The site of the muses, the nearby ancient theater is smaller, more private and "Greek." The theater is really a pitiful ruin,

with two protruding Corinthian columns, described by poets as embodying an ineffable purity and beauty.

Our forefathers were far less inclined than we to set up museums. They did not change old objects into exhibits enclosed in glass cases. They used them for new constructions, literally re-embodying the past in the present. That's why a visit to a city like Arles, where epochs and stones intermingle, is more instructive than the cold didacticism of a systematized collection. Nothing can tell us more about the duration of human artifacts and the dialogue of civilizations than the sudden encounter with a Renaissance house, unacknowledged by guide-books, built on Roman foundations with a Romanesque sculpture over its portal.

For centuries the ancient theater was treated nonchalantly and turned into a quarry of ready-made sculptural fragments. It was even a battlefield for the old and new creeds; a fanatical deacon brought a crowd of believers to destroy this testimony of ancient beauty.

In Arles, the period of Roman glory barely lasted three centuries. In A.D. 308 Constantine the Great arrived with his court. What an ennoblement of the ancient Greek trading-post! A vast palace was built for the emperor, of which only the baths have survived. They were supplied with water from mountain springs seventy kilometers from the town.

A century later Emperor Honorius[4] describes Arles as follows:

"This place is so conveniently situated, its trade is so animated, and the travelers who stop here so numerous, that it is easier to exchange products from all parts of the world here than anywhere else. Whatever the opulent East has to offer, or fragrant Arabia, Assyria or Africa, inviting Spain or fertile Gaul, you can find here in abundance, as if they were local products."

Less than a century later, the Visigoths had conquered Arles and Marseilles.

Yet it was not a sudden descent into night, at least not for Arles, which remained a stronghold of the non-existent

empire. The Roman walls and columns withstood the pressure of time. There were games held in the circus and performances in the theater up to Merovingian times. Unstopped by rubble, the fountain still trickled in the Forum. The apogee of barbarism came in the seventh and eighth centuries.

The power of the Roman provincial governors was taken over by the bishops and archbishops (a natural rather than a legal succession) called *defensores civitatis* by grateful citizens. One should not be surprised that in these times of turmoil, art ceased to be of first importance. Roman temples simply became the sanctuaries of a new creed. The Mother of Christ moved into Diana's house.

Nevertheless, objects of considerable aesthetic value have survived from the period of invasions. They possess a certain symbolic character: they are the tombs.

They occupy a huge necropolis called Alyscamps (a corruption of *elissi campi*—Elysian Fields) reaching back to ancient times, an immense salon of death where the deceased held their *rendez-vous*. The world renown of this legendary place—it was claimed that Roland and the twelve peers of Roncevaux were buried there—gave rise to a rather macabre custom. The coffins of those who declared a wish to be buried in Alyscamps were entrusted to the waves of the Rhône. A special undertakers' guild fished them out when they reached Arles, charging the so-called *droit de mortellage* for their services.

From the time of the Renaissance, Alyscamps was a real mine for lovers of bas-reliefs which were frequently stolen in order to decorate palaces and temple portals. Charles IX, the rapacious ruler, ordered a barge to be loaded with such a quantity of these priceless treasures that it sank to the bottom of the Rhône near Pont Saint-Esprit.

What remained forms part of the collection of Christian art displayed in an old church. The simplicity and beauty of the old sculptures contrasts unpleasantly with the bombastic Jesuit baroque of the interior.

Were it not for the subjects taken from the Old and New Testament and the Christian symbols, one could think that they were bas-reliefs from the late Roman era. *The Crossing of the Red Sea* (now in the cathedral) could easily be placed on a triumphal arch praising the heroism of Roman legions. The ancient tradition is vital until the end of the fifth century. It is then replaced by geometric ornaments, stylized leaves. Art begins anew with an alphabet of forms.

Only a small part of the immense field of the dead that was once Alyscamps has survived. Twelve funeral shrines have turned into rubble. The remains of the stone sepulchres seem to float along an avenue lined with old poplars toward the church of Saint-Honorat, built in Provençal style with a dome and octagonal spire and openwork windows in which fire once blazed. The dead steered toward its radiance like sailors toward a lighthouse.

Dans Arles où sont les Alyscamps[5]

Quand l'ombre est rouge sous les roses

Et clair le temps

Prends garde à la douceur des choses

The poet completely misses the mood of the place—where it is impossible to detect any sweetness. This collection of old stones and trees is austere and full of pathos, like a volume of history turned into marble.

It is curious that Provence, a country with both a distinct geographical physiognomy and a distinct civilization, did not create a strong political organism which would have aided its survival as a sovereign state. The rule of the Provençal dukes lasted five centuries (from the tenth to the fifteenth), yet it was constantly interrupted by foreign interventions: by the kings of France, German emperors, and the dukes of Barcelona, Burgundy, and Toulouse. This "eternal preface" (not only to Italy but also to Spain) shared the fate of all lands lying on a crossroads. It was too weak to resist its powerful neighbors. In

addition, the hot temperament and anarchistic spirit of the Provençal people discouraged attempts at unification.

Arles was well-equipped in both the material and spiritual domains to become the capital of Provence. The city council was relatively strong and the voice of the local archbishops could be heard far beyond the city walls. Numerous ecumenical councils were held here and in the Middle Ages Arles was called the "Gallic Rome." The crusades greatly stimulated trade and intellectual life. In 1178 when Frederick Barbarossa was crowned in Arles in the St. Trophime Cathedral, it seemed that the illustrious epoch of the Augusti and of Constantine would return.

If I say that this cathedral—counted among the great treasures of European architecture—is proof of Arles's glorious past, this might evoke an image of a huge edifice dripping with ornaments. In fact, this church, dressed in a stern cassock of gray stone, squeezed into a row of houses, is so modest that but for the sculpted portal one could pass without noticing it. It is not a Gothic cathedral that slices the horizon like lightning and dominates its surroundings, but a building whose greatness resides in its proportions—rooted to the ground, squat but not heavy. The Romanesque style, particularly the Provençal Romanesque, is the true daughter of antiquity. It trusts geometry, simple numerical rules, the wisdom of the square, balance, and weight. No juggling with stone, but a sober, logical use of the material. One receives aesthetic satisfaction from seeing that all the elements are visible, uncovered to the observer's eyes so that he can clearly recreate for himself the process of construction, dismantle and assemble in his imagination stone by stone, volume by volume, something that possesses such a convincing and overwhelming unity.

The portal is richly sculpted but the whole composition is controlled by the architect's hand. Bas-reliefs emerge like whirlpools in a big river, but do not lose touch with the main current.

Above the main entrance, an oval aureole encircles a Christ in majesty, with a thick, semi-circular braid of tightly

interwoven angels above him. A frieze with the Apostles. To the right—a procession of the saved. To the left—the dense, stout crowd of the damned. Between the columns resting on the backs of lions—the hieratic saints like uplifted tombstones. The entire composition is inspired by Graeco-Roman and early Christian sculpture.

Among the Old and New Testament scenes, somewhat to our surprise, we discover Hercules. What is a Greek hero doing on the Romanesque portal? Killing the Nemean lion. Yet it is not a misplaced page from mythology.

The Middle Ages knew no rigid division of epochs. Human history was a well-knit texture, a tapestry. The heroes of old returned to earth in images and legends to buckle down and labor in service of the new creed. The tireless Hercules combats sin in the figure of the Nemean lion.

The cathedral's interior is a harbor of peace. The portal was a song of hope and fear; it led into a vestibule of eternal silence. The central nave and the side naves are narrow, which gives an illusion of height, but not of vertical lines flying into infinity. The vault is a full arch, like a rainbow above a landscape. Day penetrates through small windows in the thick wall, but the cathedral is not gloomy. It possesses an inner light, seemingly independent of any exterior source.

Abutting the cathedral there is a monastery with a central courtyard. A small boxwood garden, like a pond, surrounded by a cloister. It was built during the twelfth and fourteenth centuries, thus it is half Romanesque and half Gothic. Yet the Romanesque frame is so strong that at first one does not notice the mixture of styles.

Above the delicately drawn arcades rise the massive walls of the cathedral and the heavy graded roof of the monastery. According to all rules such surroundings should smother the monastery courtyard, deprive it of air, turn it into a stone-faced well. And it is incomprehensible how the masters of living stone managed to transform this cramped space into a garden full of delicate lightness and charm.

The sculptures decorating the cloister are of varying artistic value, but at least a few are undoubted masterpieces: especially St. Stephen, the first patron of the cathedral; Gamaliel[6], the finder of his relics; and St. Trophîme. That Greek apostle with his beautiful flat face surrounded by a cascade of hair has an open mouth and huge, wise eyes which sink into one's memory for ever.

Arles was the capital of Provence till the end of the twelfth century. The Cathedral of St. Trophime is the last edifice of the glorious epoch. Later the political center shifted to Aix, and economically Marseilles came to dominate its old rival. Since that time Arles has been a quiet country capital. A humid wind blows over it from the sea and the Camargue, the soaked Rhône delta where herds of wild horses and bullocks graze. A scorching breeze from the Alpilles brings the scent of lavender, heat, and almonds.

There are no big events. The emperor no longer comes to town. But the calendar is full of holidays, feasts, and bullfights. On such occasions Arles revives. The Boulevard des Lices teems with visitors.

On my last day in Arles, I went to pay tribute to Mistral[7].

The Provençals remember him with the same keen sentiment as the good King René, the Andegavenian Duke, the Count of Provence—the last ruler to defend their independence. He was a typical member of the Mediterranean race. He liked and patronized music, painting, and spectacles. He wrote poems and was a decent jurist; mathematics and geology were also among his passions. Though historians cite his lack of political and military talents, legend does not bother with such trifles. The people of Provence will remember that *le bon roi* René introduced the cultivation of a new kind of grape—the muscat.

Mistral was the son of a peasant; his rule over Provence was truly regal. Moreover, he restored it to life. The poet's father read only two books: the New Testament and *Don Quixote*. One needed the faith of a knight-errant to exhume the great poetry of the troubadours stifled for seven centuries—

and to do it in a language ousted from schools and government and reduced to the level of folk dialect.

The beginnings of the Provençal revival were modest. Despite its lofty aims, Félibrige, an association founded by seven young poets in 1854, could have been easily transformed into a merry company of glass and gill worshippers, but for the genius and diligence of Frédéric Mistral, the félibre with the "Charming Glance."

His first long poem *Mireio*, published in 1859, was received with enthusiasm not only by his friends but also by the highest literary authorities in Paris. This event decided the poet's career and the fate of the movement. Mistral's entry into literature was unusual. In the age of declining romanticism, there emerges a poet that is the embodiment of romantic ideals: a spontaneous folk singer writing in the tongue of the most perfect medieval lyrics. If he had not existed, he would have been invented, like Ossian.

Its very spontaneity, lightness, and natural charm guarantee the lasting value of *Mireio*. "I have conceived a love affair between two children of Provençal nature, different in their social status, and then entrusted this yarn to the winds and surprises of life…' The poem could be called a folk *Pan Tadeusz*[8], a rich presentation of works and days, beliefs, habits, and legends of the Provençal countryside. The critics' enthusiasm was so great, that for the sake of comparison Homer, Hesiod, Theocritus, and Virgil were dragged down from the Pantheon.

The Provençal Virgil did not confine himself to poems and dramas. He edited "The Provençal Calendar," a journal that outlived its creator; he worked on the systematization of Provençal spelling and compiled a work which today would require a team of specialists. Two thick tomes *in quarto* (more than two thousand pages) are entitled *Lou Tresor dóu Félibrige ou Dictionnaire provençal-français*. It is not an ordinary dictionary, but a real Provençal encyclopedia containing, apart from its impressive grammatical and lexical material, historical notes, descriptions of customs, beliefs, and institutions, as well as a collection of riddles and proverbs.

Mistral was not only an outstanding poet, but also a vigorous organizer. His dedication transformed Félibrige from a company of merry banqueters into an organization which aimed to preserve the language, freedom, and national dignity of Provence. This manifestation of cultural identity gradually changed into a semi-political movement. After many years every attempt is made to blur the contours of this confrontation.

In 1905 Mistral, the heir of the troubadours, received the highest literary award, not from the hands of a beautiful châtelaine, but through the bequest of the inventor of dynamite. With the Nobel Prize he founded an ethnographic museum devoted to Provence, which is still housed in the Hôtel Castellane-Laval, a Renaissance palace in Arles—the favourite city of the author of *Mireio*. Recalling his early days, he says: "In those naïve days I did not dream of Paris. If only Arles, which dominated my perspective like Virgil's Mantua, would take my poetry for its own."

The *Place du Forum*, despite its name, is small, quiet, with a cluster of trees in the middle. Two Corinthian columns and fragments of an architrave are built into the ugly wall of an apartment building—evidence of a better past.

In the square Mistral's monument stands in the shadow of plane trees, a very accurate representation of the poet: a broad-brimmed hat (as if sculpted especially for pigeons), fine beard, waist-coat buttons, even shoelaces. The monument's celebrated model participated in the unveiling cerenomy by reciting the first stanzas of *Mireio*, instead of a speech.

He lived to a ripe old age and fate granted him a peaceful death on the eve of a great massacre. At the end of his life he was already a living monument, receiving homage like Goethe in Weimar, not only from poets and snobs, but even from the President of the Republic.

His death proved his true significance for Félibrige. The organization began to wither, turn provincial, and disintegrate. Though meetings are still held, authors write, and magazines are published, they are but a distant echo of the enthusiasm and momentum of the first *félibres*. Provence is no longer the

exotic country of the Romantics. Publishers in Paris are not waiting for a new Mistral. Was he the last of the troubadours?

And no one knows

Through what wild countries

This wandering rose returns.

ORVIETO'S DUOMO

A POET-FRIEND SAYS: "IF you're going to Italy, don't forget to stop at Orvieto." I check my guide-book. Only two stars. "What's there?" "A huge square with grass and a cathedral. Inside the cathedral, *The Last Judgment*."

Stepping from the train at the small station situated between Rome and Florence, you cannot see the town; it is many feet overhead and hidden by a vertical, volcanic cliff like an unfinished sculpture covered by rough canvas.

The *funicolare* deposits its passengers near Porta Rocca. There is still a kilometer's walk to the cathedral, for the most important thing in town lies deep within its center and is revealed suddenly.

The cathedral stands (if this static verb befits a thing that rives space and makes you dizzy) in a wide square; in a moment the surrounding houses fade, one ceases to notice them. The first impression is no different from the last, the dominant sensation being the impossibility of assimilating this architecture.

Robbe-Grillet[1], the master of inventories, would have written: "He stood in front of a cathedral. It was 100 metres long and 40 metres wide; the height of the façade along the middle axis was 55 metres." Though such description is devoid of vision, the stone proportions assure us that we are in Italy, where the soaring Gothic of the Île-de-France was translated into a style entirely its own, but going by the same name because of the habit of chronology (according to which everything occurring at the same time must be given a common label).

In the Orvieto Cathedral museum, there are two pieces of parchment (yellowed and damaged, as though slowly consumed by fire) that fascinate art historians studying the thorny *Fasadenproblem*. Both drawings portray the same façade of Orvieto Cathedral and constitute a remarkable example of the evolution of tastes. The earlier one, bearing the inscription "manu magistri Laurenti" ("by the hand of Master Laurence" i.e. Maitani—though there remains some doubt about this) still follows the northern style. The stress is placed upon the central section of the elevation above the main portal; vertical lines and sharp-angled triangles prevail. The second drawing introduces substantial change. Both side elements of the attic are raised, horizontal lines appear, and the composition loses its loftiness; on the other hand, it sprawls confidently. But most importantly, the facade's surface is significantly enlarged, so that color and ornament, in all their pride and splendor, may render the architecture utterly unreal.

Fourteenth-century Italians must have seen the French cathedrals as magnificent but alien works. The severe stone mass, the upward strain of vertical lines, the shameless nakedness of the skeleton and the austere ecstasy of stone surely offended the Latin fondness for the circle, the square, and the right-angle triangle—that is, for a sensual, slightly ponderous equilibrium. Perhaps it was a matter of skill as well as taste. The more chauvinist French art historians view Italian Gothic as a failed assimilation of their own discovery; Louis Reau cites Milan Cathedral, a work of many centuries and artists, as the most characteristic expression of Italian architects' impotence.

For the Italians, the Gothic structures of the north were creations of a different spirit, and they viewed them most likely with a shade of terror, like termitaries. To Italians the façade was a colorful procession slightly overdone like an opera, with choruses of sculpture, mosaics, pilasters, and pinnacles. Orvieto is one of the most striking models of this pictorial architecture: hence one feels an ambiguous mixture of enchantment, embarrassment, and total immersion in a forest of colorful stones, weaving planes of brown, gold, and blue.

The façade's oldest section has four sequences of bas-reliefs by many artists, mainly from Pisa and Siena: four great pages occupying a surface of one hundred and twenty square meters which, read from left to right, tell the story of the Creation, the genealogy of David, the lives of the Prophets, Christ, and the Last Judgment.

The story is full of both pathos and simplicity. One discovers that it is possible to render in stone the creation of light (the indicator finger of the Maker, the radiating lines, the upturned heads of the angels). The most beautiful scene is the birth of Eve. A rather portly long-haired God the Father takes a rib from Adam's slumbering body. In the next scene we see the Mother of Mankind, her head bowed, full of purity and sweetness. Further on, the Prophets unwind their scrolls, demons drag trains of the damned, and the knashing of teeth mixes with the songs of the angels perched on the branches of genealogical trees.

A huge intricate rosette embroidered in marble seems more like an ivory trinket than a piece of monumental architecture. The façade's planes are broken up not only by color but by a precision of detail worthy of a master of miniatures. If Orvieto Cathedral allows comparison to anything, it is to the first letter of an illuminated manuscript, to a high A thick with intoxication.

The disgusting habit of closing the churches at noon wastes precious hours in a carefully planned schedule. One is left with the options of a nap in the shade, a pasta debauchery, or an aimless stroll around town. I choose the latter.

The streets resemble mountain streams. Their current is swift, opening onto unexpected perspectives. One floats from the square of the Duomo down a sharp bend to the Quartiere Vecchio. The terrifying stillness of high noon. The shades are drawn; the town is asleep. The slow breathing of stones rises and sinks under the plaster of houses. Two black chairs at the gate like coffins leaning against the wall of the carpenter's shop. The streets are deserted. Cats sleep on low walls. When touched, they open their eyes, their narrow pupils marking the tranquil noon like the hands of a stopped watch.

The remains of city walls lie between Porta Maggiore and Porta Romana. Here you have a bird's-eye view of Umbria: Paglia's sands sparkling in the sun, a blue hill across the river gently rising towards the sky at the edge of the blurred horizon.

Each Italian town has its color. Assisi is pink (if this banal word can summon the shade of slightly reddish sandstone). Rome impresses itself on the memory as terracotta on green. Whereas Orvieto is golden brown. One realizes this standing in front of the Romanesque-Gothic Palazzo del Popolo, a giant cube with a wide balcony on each floor, a flat roof bristling with merlons, and beautiful windows surrounded by columns and scrolls. The palace has a copper color but without sheen. The fire is inside—the memory of lava.

No matter how far one strays, one never loses the sense that the cathedral is just behind one's back; its overwhelming presence ousts all other impressions. It is hard to imagine Orvieto (now an appendix to the cathedral) before the autumn of 1290, when Pope Nicolas IV attended by four cardinals and numerous prelates, "posuit primum lapidem" (laid the first stone), as the document states, and "incepta sunt fundamenta sacrae Mariae Novae de Urbeveteri, quae fuerunt profunda terribiliter" (a beginning was made with the foundations for the sacred church of the Maria Novella, which were terribly deep). Twenty years after the construction was initiated a prominent sculptor and architect by the name of Lorenzo Maitani was summoned from Siena. He corrected the construction errors, strengthened the walls and greatly influenced the shape and color of the façade. The great builder remained in Orvieto until his death, though he occasionally traveled to Siena or Perugia to repair the aqueducts.

The question of the Duomo's authorship is as pointless as the question who designed a town (a town, not a factory settlement) which grew through the centuries. After the mythical Fra Bevignate, the hand of Lorenzo Maitani had a deciding influence on the cathedral's conception, but after him followed Andrea Pisano[2], Orcagna[3], Sanmicheli[4], and these great names are like golden nuggets in the sand, for over the centuries the cathedral was worked on by more than thirty

architects, one hundred and fifty sculptors, seventy painters, and almost one hundred mosaic specialists.

The muses were not silent, though the times were by no means peaceful. The town was one of the hotbeds of heresy, but it was at the same time, by virtue of historical irony and thick walls, the frequent refuge of popes. The Guelph clan of the Monaldeschi fought against its Ghibelline faction, the fans of empire who were expelled from the town while the sculptors were illustrating Genesis. According to a reliable witness, the author of *The Divine Comedy*, both families suffer in Purgatory along with the kin of Romeo and Juliet. There were prolonged battles for power in the town, and Orvieto was also occupied by the Viscontis. In a word, it shared the fate of other Italian towns—in Dante's words, the fate of *dolore ostello*, "the inn of suffering."

The only restaurant with a view of the cathedral is as expensive as anything that neighbors on monuments, since you pay double for the shadow of a masterpiece on your spaghetti. The proprietor is thin, talkative, with a long turkey neck.

He: a lei Piace? (pointing towards the cathedral)

I: Molto.

He: (*con fuoco*) La facciata questo Figlio del cielo e della terra.

I: Si.

He: Qual miracolo di concentrazione…qual magistro d'arte!

I: Ecco!!!

Thus we talked about art.

On the menu I find a wine named after the town. The padrone praises it more warmly than the cathedral. Drinking "Orvieto" can be considered a cognitive act. It comes in a small *fiasco* with a cold haze, brought by a young girl with an Etruscan smile—a smile that resides in the eyes and the corners of the mouth, bypassing the rest of the face.

It is more difficult to describe a wine than a cathedral. It is the color of straw and has a strong, elusive aroma. The first sip is rather unimpressive. The effect starts after a moment. The well-like chill flows down, freezing the intestines and heart while the head blazes—quite contrary to the recommendation of a certain classicist. The sensation is enchanting; and I now understand why Lorenzo Maitani stayed in Orvieto, became a citizen; and not an honorary one, for he was obliged to race across the wooded Umbrian hills with a lance in defense of his adopted *patria.*

To enter the cathedral is yet another surprise, so much does the façade differ from the interior—as if the gate of life full of birds and colors led into a cold, austere eternity. The Duomo is a three-nave basilica with the accent on the main nave, leading to a massive apse. Powerful columns joined by cradle arches support an architecture in which sparse Gothic ornament is set in a Romanesque design, without the combination of entwining arcs so prevalent in the French school. The vault is almost flat, so the soaring walls of the façade are nothing but a mask. To the right of the altar there is another chapel, of the Madonna di San Brizio, containing frescoes painted by Fra Angelico and Luca Signorelli[5].

The art of the fresco is ancient and noble by virtue of tradition and technique. The cave paintings of southern France, painted when herds of reindeer wandered across the country, are really frescoes too.

The technique, as though following intrinsic rules, has not substantially changed from Antiquity to our time. Bound to architecture, a fresco shares the fate of walls. It is organic like a house or tree. Subject to life's natural law, it is consumed by senility.

The decoration of walls must be permeated with a sober craftsmanship. In the preparation of mortar, the knowledge of walls is as important as the right process of painting. The lime base must set for a long time before it is mixed with washed river sand. At the same time, the sun must warm the lime in which the colors will be mixed: the black of carbonized wine shoots, soil, vermilion, cadmium. The chemical chain runs

from the dampened wall to the air through three layers of mortar. The surface is varnished with salt.

The frescoes in the chapel of Madonna di San Brizio were begun by Fra Angelico, who came with three disciples to Orvieto in 1447. He stayed only three and a half months before being summoned to Rome by Pope Nicolas V. For some years the ambitious city council tried to persuade Pinturicchio[6] or Perugino[7] to complete the work. Finally in 1499, after fifty years of attempts, they reached an agreement with Luca Signorelli, a disciple of Piero della Francesca, a sixty-year-old painter at the height of his fame who came to Orvieto to sign the contract for the major work of his life. The Latin agreement shows a slightly awkward but beautiful managerial concern for the job: "*omnes colores mittendos per ipsum magistrum Lucam, mittere bonos, perfectos et pulchros*" ("the master himself will apply all the colors—good, perfect and beautiful") and Luca is obliged "*facere figuras meliores aut pares, similes et conformes aliis figuris existentibus nunc in dicta capella nove*" ("to make the figures better or equal, similar to other figures already existing in the said chapel"). At the end, a commission is appointed to appraise the artistic result.

At the top of the vault, Fra Angelico left a seated Christ and his Apostles. Both compositions are rather stiff and hieratic, as though the painter (or his disciples) overused the compass and lead wire which measured the perspective. Signorelli filled a similar space with an equal number of figures according to his predecessor's design, but his *coro dei dottori*[8] promises a drama. The draperies hold nerves and muscles, not dead fibres. This detail reveals Master Luca's primary passion: the representation of the human body in action, and he accomplished this fully in the vast planes between the arches of the vault. *The Coming of the Antichrist, The Story of the End of the World, The Saved and the Damned,* are told in a severe and somber language worthy of Dante. That must be why a British art historian, by no means of spinsterish tastes, calls that great master "virile but somewhat harsh and unsympathetic."

The favorite disciple of Piero della Francesca was not a great colorist. On the walls of St. Francis's church in Arezzo his master inscribed a transparent world permeated with light. Signorelli elevates sharp accents, chiaroscuro, and volume above the space of gently sifted planes, and his light always comes from the outside. Objects and men are vessels of darkness.

Predicazione del Anticristo ("whose coming is after the working of Satan, with all power and signs and lying wonders") is set in Jerusalem, but the background architecture is Renaissance, as if designed by Bramante[9]. Under distant arcades there are black figures with lances, like rats walking on their tails. In the foreground, he "who will come in secret and by treason obtain the Kingdom." He has Christ's face, but a demon hides behind his back. He stands amidst a crowd in which the iconologists have discovered Dante, Boccaccio, Petrarch, Raphael, Cesare Borgia, Bentivoglia[10], and Columbus.

To the right, one step forward (as if on a proscenium) stands the narrator, master Luca. His hat is crammed on his head, a loose coat and black stockings on muscular legs. His face is strong, as if taken from Breughel's peasant portraits. His eyes are firmly fixed upon reality. One can easily believe Vasari, who said that Luca followed his son's coffin without shedding a tear. Beside him Fra Angelico dressed in a cassock gazes inward. Two glances: one of a visionary, the other an observer, and to strengthen the characterization, Luca's hands are clasped tightly, while the Angelic Brother's delicate hand gestures hesitation, fingers *in dubio.* Their shoulders touch in San Brizio Chapel though they are divided by half a century. We are in the times when solidarity was the rule. It was not an accepted practice to portray an artistic predecessor as a fool.

The Resurrection of the Flesh takes place on a plain as flat as a tabletop. Above, two handsome angels, their feet firmly resting on air, blow their trumpets: "And his feet like unto fine brass, as if they burned in a furnace; and his voice as the sound of many waters." The second birth, the exit from the womb of the Great Mother, is painful. The scene is flavored with

eschatological humor, the laughter of skeletons watching a man assume his body. A surprising detail: Signorelli, who was a master of the nude, seems to have a rather fantastic notion of osteology—the pelvis resembles a wide belt with four holes in the front.

Finimondo is a fresco of immense dramatic power. On the right, the doctors dispute while the sky already blazes. “And the angels took the censer, and filled it with the fire of the altar, and cast it into the earth: and there were voices, and thunder, and lightning and an earthquake.” On the other side of the arch where the fresco unfolds are gathered men and women with children in their arms. The first victims lie on the ground; their bodies have the final stillness of objects. Overhead rise the frayed gestures of the fugitives.

Berenson rightly attributes the Renaissance fondness for the nude not only to the love of touch, movement, but also to the requirements of expression. Naked bodies evoke emotion like nothing else. *The Damned* burns our skin, makes us taste ashes on our tongue and fills our nostrils with the yellow odor of sulphur.

The scene is crowded and lacks perspective like Matejko’s *Battle of Grunwald*[11]. Naked bodies are squashed together as in a cellar during an air-raid. They are not separate entities but the mass entanglement of opposing actions, the blows of the henchmen, countered by the defensive gestures of the victims. Fascinated by movement, Signorelli understood its physical and metaphysical consequences. He knew that every action contains the seed of death and that the world’s end is a final explosion and consummation of accumulated energy. Many years before Galileo and Newton, the Quattrocento painter’s dry and objective brush defined the laws of gravity.

The sky over the damned is a study of various states of equilibrium. The three angels are balanced triangles with wings. Two bodies are deformed by a free fall. Satan with a hefty woman on his back glides down like a bird struggling in the wind. A true history of science must not neglect the studies of space, movement, and matter in fifteenth-century painting.

Finally, one must fling this blasphemy against the authors of handbooks: the Orvieto frescoes are much more impressive than Michelangelo's frescoes in the Sistine Chapel. Michelangelo was undoubtedly familiar with and influenced by the San Brizio paintings, but his vision is marked with overripe beauty, and his too flexible and unrestrained language entwines objects rather than lends them expression.

Great poets seldom find their match in illustrators. Dante found an adequate interpreter in Luca Signorelli. San Brizio Chapel contains eleven small frescoes relating to *The Divine Comedy*, in addition to several portraits of poets and, significantly, Empedocles, emerging from a medallion's black background as if from the depths of Etna. Reliable scholars have discovered that they illustrate fragments of the first eleven cantos of the *Purgatorio*. Not without trouble and doubt. For example, the first illustration portrays Dante kneeling in front of a figure in a flowing robe. The corresponding verse refers to *l'uccel divino*, the divine bird or angel. But the image is without wings, causing the sober-minded iconologist Franz Xaver Kraus to mutter a troubled "*Zweifelhaft*[12]." By the way, jokes about iconographers are suited to our times (form has expelled meaning).

The bus twists its way towards the station and the town disappears from sight just beyond its gate. You don't see it again until you're on the train. Il Duomo rises over everything like the raised hand of a prophet. For the time being, *The Last Judgment* is imprisoned under the vault of the San Brizio Chapel and will not be visited upon the town. In the honeyed air Orvieto sleeps peacefully, like a lizard.

SIENA

for Konstanty Jeleński—the Alexandrian

FROM MY WINDOW in the Tre Donzelle* the view of Siena is limited to dark courtyards, a cat on a parapet, and a display of washed linen. I go out early to see if Suarez was right when he wrote that Siena smells of boxwood in the morning. Unfortunately, it smells of car excrement. What a pity there are no conservers of smells. What a pleasure it would be to stroll around Siena, the most medieval of Italian towns, in a cloud of Trecento.

If the gods protect one from organized tours (through insufficient funds or strong character), one should spend the first hours in a new city traipsing around, following the rule: straight ahead, third left, straight ahead, third right. One can also follow the curve of a sickle. There are many systems, all of them good.

Now I am walking down a narrow street; it falls rapidly, then all of a sudden starts to climb. A leap of stones—a moment of balance—then another fall. I have been walking for over half an hour without coming across any historical monument.

Siena is a difficult town, justly compared to creations of nature—a jelly-fish or a star-fish. The pattern of its streets shares nothing with the "modern" monotony and tyranny of the right angle.

The Town Hall Square (if one can use this slighting term for the seat of government) called the Campo, has an organic contour resembling the concave of a seashell. It is one of the

world's most beautiful squares, unlike any other and for that reason difficult to describe. It is surrounded by a semi-circle of palaces and houses whose ancient red bricks appear a faded purple. The Town Hall consists of three perfectly harmonized blocks, with its middle section raised one story higher than the others. It is austere and would resemble a fortress, were it not for the musical rhythm of the Gothic windows with their two small, white columns. The spire is tall,* its top white as a flower—so the sky appears saturated with blue blood. When the sun is behind the hall, over the Piazza del Mercato, an immense shadow like the hand of a clock sweeps across the Campo. The spire is familiarly called Mangia, after the nickname of the medieval bell-ringer who was later replaced by a mechanical device. From its top one can survey the town with the perspective of a swallow or an historian.

In aristocratic times powerful families sought mythological antecedents; later this habit was inherited by democratic towns, who invented their illustrious founders. The rich imagination of the Sienese made them claim descent from Senius, son of Remus, who was said to have sheltered here to avoid the wrath of his uncle, the founder of Rome. To this legend Siena owes its emblem: a she-wolf. The *bolzana* or banner of the town is black and white; these heraldic colors perfectly represent the impetuous temperament and contradictory character of the Sienese.

Because the surrounding soil does not contain Etruscan remains, it is assumed that the town was founded as a Roman colony about thirty years B.C. Governed in the Middle Ages by the Longobards and Franks, the town flourished under the patronage of bishops, and later during the increasingly open resistance of its citizens to the feudal descendants of the invaders, who camped in fortified Tuscan hawks' nests like Monte Amiata, Santa Fiore, and Campagniatico. They were ruthless pillagers; it is no wonder that Dante cast Umberto from the Aldobrandeschi family to wail in one of the cave mouths of Purgatory.

City councils grew in force so quickly that by the thirteenth century the Sienese *podestà* threatened to chain a mighty representative of the Ardengheschi family in the market-place

“like a butcher’s dog” if the nobleman failed to halt his violence.

Nevertheless, it would be incorrect to imagine that the Republic of Siena was the embodiment of democratic ideals. The aristocracy possessed great influence and, highly unusually, the *milites et mercatores sieneses*[1] were of aristocratic origin. Members of the Tolomei family claimed, with Tuscan megalomania, to be the offspring of Ptolemy. In fact, the most powerful bourgeois families—Buonsignori, Cacciaconti, and Squarcialupi—descended from the German invaders. Liberated from the pressure of helmets, their heads adapted well to accountancy; the warriors’ bronze soon yielded to the precious metals of bankers. These demilitarized merchants undertook long expeditions throughout Europe, surpassing even the Jews in the silver trade. They became the Pope’s bankers, which brought them large revenues and useful church sanctions against recalcitrant debtors.

So was Siena siding with the papacy? No. To explain, one must go to history: the struggle between the Guelphs and the Ghibellines, of course.

At first (in the twelfth century), these names signified two German political factions: the Guelphs stood by the princes of Saxony and Bavaria, while the Ghibellines supported the Hohenstaufen. Carried over to Italy, the rivalry kept its name but changed its meaning. From a local conflict it grew into a problem of universal significance: the struggle between the papacy and the Emperor.

At the beginning of the twelfth century Siena faced its destiny: a choice between submission or difficult independence. Florence became its chief adversary, not only because of historical intricacies but also geo-political position); from this time onward both communities hated each other and “fought with sword and word in refined ferocity, harassed each other in stories, legends and poetry.” The map of Italy tells us that this confrontation was inevitable. The city of the she-wolf blocked Florence off from the Via Francigena —the shortest route to Rome. Both cities fought for access to

the sea. In Tuscany there was no room for a powerful Florence and a powerful Siena.

An historian justly notes that as Florence officially sided with the Guelphs, Siena had no choice but to side with the Ghibellines. But this is just a scholarly distinction. In fact the names of medieval parties were as misleading as are the names of contemporary ones. Guelphic Florence often participated in anti-papal leagues; and Sienese bankers could not be very serious Ghibellines, being tied to Rome through golden threads of interest. When Charles IV, officially an ally, threatened Siena's independence, he was promptly taught a lesson despite his imperial titles.

Besides, both cities had Guelph and Ghibelline followers and these designations often referred to traditional adversaries: like the Montecchi and the Capuleti, who for generations showered each other's gardens with stones, cut off the ears of their enemy's confidants, and in dark alleys silenced the hearts of their enemy's kinsmen with daggers.

The external policy of each Italian state (and an Italian polis was a state) is much more comprehensible and logical than their internal workings, and studied now, it resembles an old clock which stopped centuries ago. The Sienese power structure was complex and changed substantially in the course of time. The rule of the Twenty-four, which lasted up to 1287, was an expression of a precarious balance of social forces which oscillated between timocracy and democracy.

The Council, or the *Signoria*, was elected for a short period and functioned as a cabinet. Its members were equally divided between the *milites* and representatives of the people's party. These divisions did not imply class distinctions. Since the term "people" was invented, there have always been those who claimed to best represent its ambitions.

The *Consiglio Generale della Campagna*, or parliament, was composed of three hundred of the city's most prominent residents, who elected the Signoria every two months. They also chose the podestà and guarded him like an elderly miser guards his young wife. The podestà, the highest officer of state (like the king in a constitutional monarchy, an honorary

position rather than an office), was usually a foreigner. Elected annually, he was prevented from obtaining absolute power by a multitude of superstitious regulations. The financial administration, called *Biccherna*, and *Gabella*, the administration of customs, were entrusted to the monks of San Galgano and Servi de Maria—as the best guardians of gold are those who have taken a vow of poverty.

On September 4, 1260, Siena lived its finest hour—routing the strong Florentine army of thirty thousand men near its walls at Monteaperti, "che fece l'Arbia[2] colorata in rosso." The river flowed with blood, sang the poet. There are many contradictory accounts of the battle; if the truth be told, the chaos of every battle combat is systematized *post factum* by generals, politicians, and chroniclers, who herein show the fine human longing for rational order and the casual explanation of events of their very essence obscure. All the bells tolled in Siena. Clouds of ravens and vultures swarmed above the battlefield. Processions circled the city, and the proud banner of Florence was dragged through the mud tied to the tail of an ass. That night Siena sweetly dreamed of Florence in ruins.

But fortune soon turned its back on the city of the she-wolf. The death of Manfred, the last Hohenstaufen, who had sent his cruel, blond riders to the city's aid, marked the downfall of the Ghibellines throughout Italy. The staggering career of the gold florin became Siena's economic defeat.

A radical change in policy followed in the city so faithful to the imperial idea. The rule of the Twenty-four gave way to the *Noveschi*, the Nine, who were selected from the prosperous merchants of the Guelph party. Thoroughly businesslike, unadventurous and peace-loving, the government ruled from 1287 for nearly seventy years. A lot of buying was in fact done. During this period the cathedral was built, Duccio[3] painted his *Great Maestà*, and Ambrogio Lorenzetti[4] told the story of the sweet life under good leadership in his great fresco.

But the internal feuds continued until the Black Death reconciled the contestants. The terrible plague swept like a flame through Europe, carrying away one-third of its

population. It broke out in 1348, casting an ominous shadow on the flourishing civilization. Historians of Sienese art divide it into the periods before and after the epidemic. “There was a gap, a hiatus in history. Everywhere construction work in full swing was halted.” Another scholar adds: “The great epoch of cathedrals and crusades ended in decay and terror.”

“…Some of the sufferers died from want of care, others equally who were receiving the greatest attention…. No constitution was of itself strong enough to resist or weak enough to escape the attacks; the disease carried off all alike and defied every mode of treatment. Most appalling was the despondency which seized upon anyone who felt himself sickening; for he instantly abandoned his mind to despair and, instead of holding out, absolutely threw away his chance of life…. they perished in wild disorder. The dead lay as they had died, one upon another, while others hardly alive wallowed in the streets and crawled about every fountain craving water…. for the violence of the calamity was such that men, not knowing where to turn, grew reckless of all law, human and divine. The customs which hitherto had been observed at funerals were universally violated, and they buried their dead each one as best he could.”

This is not a fragment of an Italian chronicle but an excerpt from *The Peloponnesian War*. However, Thucydides’ words paint equally well the terror of the epidemic in Siena, which claimed three-quarters of its inhabitants.

The fall of the Nine deepened the anarchy in this most insane of Italian towns, threatened continually by powerful condottieri like the terror-sowing Sir John Hawkwood[6], alias Acuto.

Violent, frequent changes of government usually give birth to numerous, quarrelsome political parties. Siena was no exception. A victorious faction often expelled supporters of the defeated side. Thousands of political emigrants, the *fuoriusciti*, wandered like Dante across Italy.

Emigration conserves political ideas; and one can read with astonishment that Pandolfo Petrucci[7], the homebred tyrant who granted Siena its last period of stability, continued to

support the Noveschi party a hundred years after its expulsion from the city.

Accompanied by a group of emigrants, Pandolfo conquered Siena and consolidated his position as its autocratic leader, *Il Magnifico*. Historians differ in their judgment of him. Machiavelli liked Petrucci because he loved his fatherland and was shrewd, crafty, and used his dagger and poison as one uses medicine—as needed. He managed to halt temporarily the carousel of factions and could sustain a defeat: he was briefly exiled by his mortal enemy, Cesare Borgia. During the fifteen years of his rule, he constantly maneuvered between the papacy, Florence, and France. Was he a great man? He certainly could not match the Medici. He was a Magnifico on the Sienese scale. The clocks of the city struck mercilessly: you will be provincial.

He also failed to measure up to the Medici because his offspring were unremarkable and his idea of an hereditary tyranny came to nothing because his boys had feeble minds and were lustful hooligans.

Although the sixteenth century started favorably for the city of the she-wolf (Pandolfo Petrucci did not die until 1512), Siena's death throes were unavoidable. This time its support for the emperors did not prove healthy for the republic. Charles V, the King of Spain, taking advantage of internal disorder and allegedly in order to reconcile the partisans, seized the city. He installed a governor-general and—horror of horrors—built a fortress within the walls for the Spanish garrison. With the aid of the French, the Sienese managed to dislodge the Spanish; but the city fell under siege, thus opening the final chapter of its history as an independent republic.

The Florentine army approached the gates of the city, reinforced by the cruel Spaniards, who spread universal terror. The neighboring villages were burned and trees laden with hanged men. *Messer* Blaise de Montluc[8], a colorful figure, Gascon by birth, Sienese by choice, a rogue and womanizer, barricaded himself into the city.

The siege lasted from the beginning of 1554 until the spring of 1555. Despite general hunger, the defense was heroic and continued even after the defeat of Marshal Strozzi, the commander of the French forces supporting Siena. Women also engaged in the fighting. Although mice and rats were the only available food, the defenders staged a sumptuous carnival. Siena died in style. Finally, on April 2, the act of surrender was signed. Quite an honorable one, as it included a clause allowing those who did not wish to live under the new rule to leave the city. The exodus commenced: a long file of prominent citizens, wagons crammed with possessions, and finally the defenders themselves, marching to the sound of drums under flying banners. An ecstatic Montluc cried: "Vous êtes dignes d'une immortelle louange[9]." A fitting funeral oration.

None of this can be seen from the top of the spire. But the Town Hall looks exactly as it did when it housed the *Noveschi* meetings; the same black and white cathedral, churches, bell-towers, palaces like huge dark rocks in a flood of piled-up houses, a net of narrow streets snaring three hills and contracting around the Campo like wrinkles around an eye. One can also see the gates and walls which do not tightly encircle the town, but hang loosely around it like a belt on a fat man who has suddenly lost weight. In its glory, Siena's population was three times its present size.

Beyond the wall the Tuscan landscape:

...Smoke from shepherds' fires stands motionless

Above the flame, ductile and white; no one knows,

Whether angels descended among

Plum-coloured hills to shake down silver olives

Or whether...

Jarosław Iwaszkiewicz[10]

Before I came to Italy, I thought that the old masters were not realistic and that their landscapes were like operatic scenery. In fact they depicted highly realistic scenes, albeit synthetic ones, similar to many Tuscan views and hence probably even more faithfully rendered. It is a landscape in motion: an emerald mountainside climbing sharply upwards and suddenly severed, surprised by a gentle hill which, jumping from the side like a hare, leads to a slope covered with vine; to the right—an olive grove, the silver trees twisted as if a storm were raging; to the left—the dark, motionless feathers of cypresses.

Mezzogiorno—noon. The sun parches the earth and bemuses the mind. Blinds clatter shut. White flames of heat soar above the stones.

I make a quick calculation that I could afford only a cup of coffee and a piece of bread with ham. Besides, one is not hungry at noon. But in the evening I will be able to indulge in a gastronomic feast.

A low-vaulted, somber hallway leads into a little café. Instead of doors, strings of wooden beads rattle pleasantly under my touch. The padrone greets me as if we were old schoolmates. Wonderful, aromatic coffee called cappuccino pours clarity into one's head and draws fatigue from one's limbs. The padrone recounts a complicated story thickly strewn with numbers. I understand little but listen with delight, though the tale may concern his financial ruin. However, it is difficult to sense a drama behind these childish sounds: *diciotto, cinque cinquanta, settanta.*

Time to return to the Palazzo Pubblico, this time to investigate its interior. On the first floor there are two vast rooms, the *Sala del Mappamondo* and the *Sala della Pace*, or *dei Nove.* Their walls are covered with the most beautiful frescoes in Siena. Those in the Sala del Mappamondo were painted by Simone Martini[11]. To the left of the entrance hangs the Maestà, the first known work of Martini, who must have had a meteoric career in his native town, if he was entrusted with such a responsible task when he was barely thirty. The

work is dated June 1315. Seven years later, Martini and his disciples repainted the Maestà.

Despite much damage, the fresco is hugely impressive. Though painted only five years after Duccio's *Great Maestà,* its style is utterly different. The beginning of the Trecento is a promontory of epochs and styles. Martini's masterpiece is striking in its free subject-treatment, the lyrical softness of its gestures. Mary is seated on a Gothic throne. Its openwork architecture contrasts with the thrones of Duccio and early Giotto (if only the ones in the Uffizi) powerful as steel and iron. Near the Virgin stand two female saints, hands folded on their breasts. The figures of the angels are not like painted statues; a gentle line sways them as the wind sways trees. Those who kneel at the Virgin's feet offer her flowers, not cold symbols, and she accepts them like a castellan's daughter accepting the homage of troubadours. A canopy, light as a skein of silk, unwinds above their heads. Damp has worn the gold and blue, but the tonality of the concerto is pure, like the sound of a harpsichord heard from afar.

On the opposite wall—a magnificent equestrian portrait of the condottiere Guido Riccio da Fogliano. It so differs from the Maestà that this difference was even noticed by art historians. Painted fourteen years later, it is the negation of the lyrical, celestial Maestà.

A man in the vigor of life—stocky, with a common face and energetically clenched fists—rides across barren, flax-colored ground. Over his armor he wears a dark beige coat with brown triangles. A similar caparison covers his powerful steed. Both rider and beast constitute a single body emanating tremendous energy and strength, though they ride at walking pace. Had the chronicles been silent about the cruelties of the condottieri, this portrait would furnish sufficient indictment.

The landscape is dry as a threshing floor. No trees, no blade of grass—only an abatis of dry sticks and the feeble flowers of military emblems. On both sides of the fresco, the meager architecture of two castles crowns twin hills. The one on the left is Monte Massi whose castellan rebelled against Siena.

There is no doubt that Guido Riccio will smash these towers, shatter these walls.

In the Sala della Pace resides the allegory of *Good and Bad Government*, the largest medieval fresco devoted to secular matters, painted by Ambrogio Lorenzetti between 1336 and 1339. Ambrogio (he had a brother, Piero, also an excellent painter—both died in the Black Death) was, after Duccio and Martini, the third great Trecento Sienese painter. I know one is supposed to admire this painting, but the lighting is bad and the colors have faded. *Bad Government* in particular is barely legible. Looking through Enzo Carli's book on Sienese primitive painting, I was shocked: after my direct but pale aesthetic experience I was overwhelmed by the photographs. A humbling affair.

Later I read with some satisfaction that the value of *Good and Bad Government* is disputed. Berenson[12], the ardent supporter of Florence—a Guelph—turns up his nose and says that the theme proved larger than the author, that Lorenzetti could not find an adequate artistic expression for his idea and had to use inscriptions, an auxiliary means unbecoming to an artist. Enzo Carli—Siena's chief restorer and thus a Ghibelline—defends the work, stressing its historical and compositional value. The hero of the fresco is not a man, not even a city, but an entire civilization: both a painter's *summa*, and an epic. No wonder the work fell prey to scholarly ants. In the deluge of historical, philosophical, iconological contributions, aesthetic value was lost.

The fresco is full of wonderful details: a little slanting roof of slate, an open window bisected by shadow; in the window, a cage with a gold-finch, and the head of an inquisitive maid. Clear, well-defined colors ranging from sandy ochre through hot carmine to bronzes and the warm red of deep interiors. The massive city landscape, almost phantasmagoric in its brightness, changes into a country landscape, painted for the first time with such breadth and tender care for details. Lorenzetti also builds his space in an utterly new way. It is not the golden, abstract air of Duccio, nor the rational perspective of Giotto. Lorenzetti, as an aesthete once rightly remarked, introduces a cartographic perspective. The observer does not

stand in one place; he views more remote planes with equal clarity and precision. His eagle's eye embraces the warm, undulating matter of the earth.

When I take the stairs I automatically end up in the hall called Sala Monumentale. The name is appropriate: the walls are littered with monumental pieces of kitsch representing Victor Emmanuel in various poses. Official nineteenth-century painting is equally terrible everywhere. Let's get out of here as soon as possible.

The sun casts long shadows. The sunset adds fire to the brick houses. The *passeggiata*, a daily ritual, is taking place in the main street, Via di Città.

To say that it is a walk is to say nothing. Every Italian town has a street which fills in the evening with a crowd of strollers, pacing back and forth for an hour or two in a limited area. It resembles an extras' run-through of a gigantic opera. The elders demonstrate their vigor and rehearse their titles: "Buona sera, dottore," "Buona sera, avvocato." Girls and boys walk separately, communicating only with their eyes. That is why their eyes become large, black, and expressive; they recite love sonnets, dart flames, complain, curse.

I came to Siena from Naples—and from Naples I brought with me a liking for pizza. It is a meal that makes an excellent accompaniment to wine. Essentially, pizza is a kind of pancake covered with sliced tomatoes, onions, anchovies, black olives. There are many kinds of pizza—from the fancy *capricciosa* to the popular kind that is baked on a huge iron sheet and sold by the portion.

I eat two portions and order a third. The owner of the trattoria is clearly touched. She says that I am *gentile*. Later she asks my nationality, and learning that I am *Polacco*, she exclaims *Bravo*! with sincere enthusiasm. She summons her sleepy husband and fat daughter to witness our historic meeting. The whole family declares that the Poles are "molto gentili e intelligenti." Perhaps I shall be asked to demonstrate a Polish national dance and to sing an aria by Moniuszko[13]. Unexpectedly, the owner inquires if there are divorces in

Poland. I lie that there aren't, and bring down a torrent of praise on my head.

Above the Piazza del Campo—*luna plena*. Shapes harden. A chord is strung between heaven and earth. Such a moment gives an intense feeling of crystallized eternity. The voices will die. The air will turn into glass. We shall remain here, petrified: I, raising a glass of wine to my lips; the girl in the window arranging her hair; the old man selling postcards under a streetlamp; the square with the Town Hall and Siena. The earth will turn with me, an unimportant exhibit in a cosmic wax museum, visited by no one.

2

ONLY TODAY HAVE I learned who Duccio really was, the mysterious painter whose date of birth is uncertain and of whom little is known other than that he died famous and in debt. His magnum opus, the Maestà, is just being renovated. I stand as if before golden stained glass in the Museo dell'Opera del Duomo, facing a panel of thirty-six small paintings that constitute the Maestà *in verso*. The room is small and dark, yet it contains a source of light. The radiance of the work is so extraordinary that even in a cellar it would shine like a star.

Though Duccio was barely one generation older than Giotto, their work seems centuries apart. Both probably studied with Cimabue. The three large Madonnas in the Uffizi —those of Cimabue, Duccio, and Giotto—are, despite all differences, heavy, ripe fruits of the Byzantine tree. The careers of these men, probably friends, were as dissimilar as their characters. Enterprising Giotto rushes between Rome, Assisi, Padua, and Florence. Duccio scarcely leaves his hometown. One can easily imagine the former in a country tavern, downing red wine in great gulps and tearing fat pieces of meat with his thick fingers, which only a moment before painted aureoles over the heads of saints. The latter, a feeble, ascetic man in a tattered coat, takes long, lonely walks, most often north, to a small Sienese hermitage inhabited by parched anchorites.

Only in sexless historical textbooks are both painters treated equally. A critic of defined taste must choose. Berenson aptly calls Duccio the last great painter of antiquity. "His old men are the last descendants, in unbroken line, of the Alexandrian philosophers; his angels are Victories and Genii; his devil is Silenus[14]." The American scholar quite rightly stresses the gift of dramatic composition in the Sienese artist. *The Betrayal of Judas*: "Motionless, in the middle of the foreground, we see the figure of Christ. The slim and supple Judas entwines Him in an embrace, while the lightly clad soldiers lay hands on Him…Meanwhile on the left, hot-tempered Peter rushes at a soldier with his knife…the disciples in a crowded flock scurry away…." Let us add that a crevice like black lightning opens above the heads of the running Apostles. Duccio makes even stones show emotion. The image consists of two large masses of definite compositional and dramatic significance. It is impossible to misinterpret the action.

Despite the decorative quality, excellent pictorial matter and the profound thought of this Christian Sophocles, Duccio (in Berenson's eyes) does not make the grade of genius. In the case of no other artist are the obvious nineteenth-century taste of this American Florentine and the deficiency of his aesthetic criteria more clearly revealed. Berenson demanded from art an affirmation of life and the material world. He wanted to hear a powerful aria and overlooked the more subtle modulations. He admired tactile values, expressiveness of forms, movement. He praised the masters in whom he noticed a new conception of the solid; thus he exalted Giotto over Duccio. Today, not without the help (yes, yes) of contemporary painting, we are inclined to correct this judgment.

Berenson was the child of a century that valued progress. The "Byzantine" Duccio had to be out-distanced by the "Renaissance" Giotto. But the prominent scholar overlooked at least two important issues.

Duccio did not belong to the category of artists who make spectacular discoveries. He was one of those who produce new syntheses. The latter group is often underrated because they are less expressive. To notice them means to be thoroughly

acquainted with their epoch and artistic background. More recent scholars justly noted that the work of the great Sienese brought about the synthesis of two prominent, antithetical cultures: on the one hand, Byzantine neo-Hellenism with its hierarchies and anti-naturalism; and on the other, the Western European—specifically French—Gothic, with its exaltation, naturalism, and inclination towards drama.

Giotto paves the road for the resurrected heritage of the Romans, who after all did not make great contributions to the world of aesthetics. Although he worked two centuries before the discovery of America, it is no anachronism to connect his name with the Renaissance. The European painting that came after him—though no one seems to say this openly—loses contact with the immense, petrified cultural spheres of Europe and Asia. It becomes a great, but local, adventure, unleashing the monster of naturalism. The connection with the great rivers of humanity, the Nile, Tigris, and Euphrates, is broken.

Though obviously fascinated by the miniatures of the Paris School, Duccio returns inward, to the roots of culture. Unlike Giotto, he is not a discoverer of new lands but an explorer of sunken islands.

I realized all this much later. At the time, I stood dumbfounded in front of the panel resembling golden stained glass, which tells the story of the lives of Christ and Mary. Forty-five scenes remain in Siena, fourteen were snatched by collectors of the Old and New World.

The radiance of the work is overwhelming. At first I attributed it to the golden background which, perhaps due to bad restoration, cracks, and damaged glaze, is never rigid and homegenous like metal but has its own depths, its shivers and waves, its hot and cold regions lined with greens and cinnabars. To prevent the total disappearance of the colors juxtaposed with the gold, they had to be given supernatural intensity: the leaves are like small sapphires; the hide of the donkey in flight from Egypt is like gray granite; and the snow on the bare, truncated cliffs glitters like mother-of-pearl. The painting of the Duocento is close to the art of the mosaic: a plane encrusted with spots of color which had the hardness of

alabaster, of precious stones, of ivory. (Only much later did painted matter begin to slacken: in the Venetians we have skeins of silk, brocade, and muslin; by the Impressionist period, no more than colorful steam.) The scale of color is rich and flamboyant. To find an adequate comparison Focillon reaches beyond Byzantium and calls to his aid Persian gardens and miniatures.

If the Byzantine painters are criticized for their disdain for detail (which for some means a lack of realism), this objection does not apply to Duccio, whose sense of detail was outstanding. In his *Wedding at Cana* the servings of fish, both the whole and the half-eaten ones, are very concrete. The master does not hesitate to introduce episodes contrary to accepted iconographic convention: for example, *Christ's Entry into Jerusalem* is watched by a group of urchins perched on a green grandstand of trees. My favorite painting is *The Washing of the Feet*. It is the perfect example of the use of a group. Young theatre directors should apprentice themselves to Duccio, and it wouldn't hurt some older ones either. Pictures by the great Sienese could be put on stage. It is amazing how little use is made in acting schools of these studies of gesture; no wonder that we see stage princes moving like peddlers.

In *The Washing of the Feet* Duccio builds his drama like a Greek tragedian. He uses only two actors, but in the background he places a chorus commenting on the events. Half of the Apostles look at Christ with adoration, half with reproach. They seem to disapprove of the Master's act of humility. The detail that never fails to enchant me is the three black sandals: two lie just beside the wooden water bucket and one a bit higher, on the step on which the Apostles are seated. They contrast sharply with the pink background of the floor, and the verb "lie" does not render the nature of their existence in the painting. They are the most alive element in the scene, their diagonal position and their far-flung latchets give an impression of rat-like flight. The disquiet of the sandals contrasts with the pale deadliness of a white curtain, which hangs above the Disciples' heads like an ominous shroud.

After Duccio, one should look at nothing more, to retain as long as possible the splendor of this masterpiece. It was

appreciated by the painter's contemporaries. The introduction of the Maestà into the cathedral in 1311 is one of the earliest-described homages of ordinary people to a work of art.

"On the day the picture was carried to the cathedral, shops were closed. The Bishop himself led a solemn procession accompanied by the Lords Nine, all the officials of the commune and a great company of priests and the faithful. The townsmen with lighted candles went side by side, trying to take up the places closest to the altar; behind them, with great piety, went women and children. And on their way to the cathedral they walked around the Campo as they were wont; and all the bells tolled joyfully in honour of the great painting. This picture was painted by Duccio di Buoninsegna, who lived in the house of the Muciatti outside the gate at Stalloreggi. And the whole day was spent in prayer and almsgiving, and they prayed to God and His Holy Mother who is our advocate to defend us in His infinite mercy from all adversity and all evil and to keep us from the hands of traitors and enemies of Siena."

After Duccio one really has no desire to look at anything else. Even *The Three Graces*, a copy of Praxiteles, cannot keep one in the museum. Through the scorched square I sneak over to the shady side of Via del Capitano, then to the shady side of Via del Stalloreggi. The heat is unbearable. Just a moment ago I soared on the wings of aesthetic ecstasy; now I want to curse all museums, monuments, and the sun.

At last a trattoria that looks modest enough and is called neither "Excelsior" nor "Continentale." There is a nice, cellar-like coolness inside mixed with the smell of wine, onions, and hot olive oil. For starters I order spaghetti. This dish as we know is served as an appetizer, as an introduction to the main course. The French start with exciting hors d'oeuvres; the Italians act more reasonably, as required by their peasant cuisine which is excellent and nutritious. The philosophy of taste on the Italian peninsula is based on the principle that one satiate hunger as soon as possible and only then think about more subtle culinary experiences. And anyway, real Italian spaghetti is exquisite, rather tough, served with spicy sauce, sprinkled with parmesan, and must be reeled in on a fork,

which gives eating a touch of ritual. Later, one usually has a steak fried in pepper with a quarter of tomato and a lettuce leaf. For dessert, a cool, ripe peach; and all this washed down by a young local wine served like water in large glasses, not in those awkward, silly constructions on glass legs.

Determined to escape the high noon in a cool place, I buy *Il Messaggero* with a huge photo of Chessman[15] on the front page. So it finally happened? The photograph eternalizes the historical moment: Chessman finishes his last cigarette. In the corner of the mouth in this ugly, cynical, tormented face, only a butt smolders.

I must have dozed off since the air has changed from white to amber and the heat begun to lift. I sit on a stone bench near the wall of the Hospital of Santa Maria della Scala, which faces the cathedral. The hospital visitors exchange news about the health of their relatives. Nervous gestures and poignant bottles of tea with syrup, sealed with pieces of cloth. The smell of antiseptics from the open hospital gate blows straight into the face of the Duomo.

The cathedral is situated in the most elevated square of the town and is like a tall black and white emblem of the city, a song that soars and falls in the cascade of sculptures, openwork arches, and golden stars. On its left side, a beautiful tower—an angel's spear resting against the air.

One should not surrender to the dictatorship of guide-books but look at this edifice, one of the most beautiful in the world, with a critical eye. After the first rapture, of course. One should not deny oneself the pleasure of enchantment, and the creators of the façade, among them Giovanni Pisano, did everything to keep us in a state of aesthetic fever.

Many art historians claim that the cathedral in Siena is the most outstanding Gothic building in Italy. But the French say, sneeringly and with ill-concealed indignation, that their style, the Gothic, on the Apennine Peninsula is in fact a Romanesque style with added cross-arched vaults. Three portals of the cathedral are topped with full arches; the tympana[16] without sculptures are Romanesque. The battle between the circle and the triangle remains unresolved, and the huge rosette ("O,

omega, the violet ray of his eyes[17]") in the thicket of ornamental details sounds like a mighty gong in the midst of pipes, flutes, and tiny bells. The influence of Cistercian monks, apostles of the austere Gothic from neighboring San Galgano (one directed the construction of the cathedral in 1257, eleven years after work commenced), is visible in the plan of the building rather than its ornamentation. Pierre du Colombier is right to suggest placing a hand over one's eyes and splitting the Duomo into two halves, along the line of the cornice above the tympana. The parts, upper and lower, do not harmonize well—as if someone had placed a complex, intricate top on a calm, Romanesque base, trying to force a synthesis of architecture with a reliquary.

One can defend Siena's Duomo in many ways. The most important argument is that the façade was created over centuries and that nineteenth-century restorers did their best to debase the masterpiece.

Yet it does not diminish the astonishment of someone whose taste for the Gothic was shaped by the cathedrals of the Île-de-France. Luckily cultural transmission does not take place by photographic reproduction.

I close my eyes to call Chartres to mind. I see the soaring gray sandstone. I open my eyes and see the Duomo of Siena; a cloud of pigeons shimmering in the sun—their uneven, circular, slightly leaden flight.

The interior is equally astonishing. Unlike the cathedral in Orvieto, built half a century later, it is not a basilica with a closed roof, but a building on the Cistercian plan. The chancel is cut straight, the walls of the nave are without a *triforium*[18]. It is most difficult to get used to the dome in Italian Gothic architecture. Besides, the one in Siena is not very successful, especially seen from outside, and it is hard to understand what function it serves. However, it looks differently from within. In the transept the dome rests on six columns. A glance from a side nave reveals an amazing play of interweaving planes and perspectives, like a remote echo of Ravenna.

Aesthetic purists squirm with outrage at the sight of the Duomo's plan. How can you combine the plan of a basilica

with a central plan? A mistake, hiss the rhetoricians of architecture.

The interior is unusually expressive, not only because of the black and white stripes of stone. The Romantics were well aware of its dramatic quality. When composing *Parsifal*, Wagner asked the painter Jankowski[19] to send him sketches of the Sienese cathedral. In the composer's imagination this church came closest to the ideal temple of the Holy Grail.

What is the essence of the Gothic? Is it a principle of construction or an aesthetic principle of style? How should we understand the domination of horizontal lines and arcades with full arches? And besides, one's sight is rooted to the ground by the cathedral's inlaid floor, the product of an unusual, nearly two-centuries-long effort by numerous artists; three hundred square meters in which one can see the whole development of art, from the linearity of Domenico di Niccola to the painterly treatment of stone by Domenico Beccafumi[20].

Moving to the right we pass the black and white birch columns and enter the Piccolomini[21] Library. It is one of Siena's art treasuries, which cannot go unnoticed even by the aesthetically blind, since two guards at the entrance collect an extra charge. The Libreria contains wonderful illuminated manuscripts and ten frescoes representing the life of Aeneas Sylvius Piccolomini, later Pius II. It once held *The Three Graces*, but a priest incensed by their beautiful nakedness banished them to the museum.

Aeneas Piccolomini is one of the most likeable figures of the Italian Renaissance. A humanist, poet, diplomat, an author of frivolous comedies and Latin dissertations. As was fashionable in his time he wrote about everything from horses to Homer. Portraits of him show the appealing features of a descendant of the Sienese aristocracy: a lover of nature, Virgil, and women. He wrote a kind of anti-Castiglione: *The Miserable Lives of Courtiers*. "Dinners are always served at the wrong time, and one always feels sick afterwards…the wine is bitter…Frugal princes make their courtiers gulp ale… A mug, which the servants wash once a year, is passed among the table companions, each more revolting than the next…the

court holds philosophers and sages in contempt…" To justify this misanthropy let us add that Aeneas stayed not in Urbino, but at a northern court in Germany.

After a turbulent and less than exemplary youth, he took holy orders rather late at forty-one. He severely condemned his own adventures as well as his libertine novel, *History of Two Lovers*, for which even the most God-abiding biographers tend to excuse him, because of his extremely interesting portrayal of manners. However, having put on his purple robe, Aeneas referred to it with distaste, calling the book *Due Dementi*.

He was a man of modern times; and like his Roman namesake he inherited a desire for fame. Wishing to correct the error of fate which consigned his birth to the lowly town of Corsignano, he changed its name to Pienza. Within four years he erected in this remote place an amazing cathedral, numerous Renaissance palaces and houses—all with the assistance of the outstanding architect Rossellino and ambitious cardinals competing for his favors. There was also a poet who exalted the fantasy of the Pope in ancient measures. After the death of Pius II, life abandoned Pienza. What remained was a collection of stone-cuttings. An empty town with a moral lesson.

To commemorate this unusual figure, Cardinal Francesco Piccolomini, the nephew of Pius II, ordered ten frescoes portraying the life of his prominent uncle. The author was Pinturicchio.

This exquisite narrator, "never pedantic and never profound," painted the walls of the Libreria at the mature age of fifty, at the height of his popularity. With Perugino, he was the Pope's painter-in-residence for many years. A judgment by one of his patrons: "Perugino is the most outstanding master among Italian painters, and with the exception of Pinturicchio, his disciple, no one else deserves an honorable mention." Modern historians of art are more severe with him and place him, I think rightly, among the highly educated, skillful, and charming painters of the Quattrocento, rewarded by fortune with disciples of genius. Verrochio[22] was overshadowed by the

work of Leonardo; Ghirlandaio[23] by the vision of Michelangelo; Raphael seems the perfect fulfillment of the aspirations of Perugino and Pinturicchio.

Many criticisms can be made of the fresco (which remains in perfect condition, probably because restorers have not touched it), but that doesn't prevent one from feeling its irresistible charm. Even Berenson, who stuffs Pinturicchio into the inferno of narrators and decorators, in the excellent company of Duccio, Piero della Francesca, and Raphael, cannot resist the fascinating evocation of the outstanding humanist—Aeneas Sylvius Piccolomini.

"Bad as they are in every other way, they are at the very least masterpieces of architectonic decoration. Pinturicchio had been given an oblong room of no extraordinary dimensions; but what he did not make of it! Under a ceiling daintily ornamented with inset panels of painting, a row of grand arches open spaciously on romantic landscapes. You have a feeling of being under shelter, surrounded by all the splendor that wealth and art can contrive, yet in the open air—and that open air not boundless, raw, but measured off, its immensity made manifest by the arches which frame it…Now it happens that certain processions, certain ceremonies, rather motley, not over-impressive, are going on in this enchanted out-of-doors. But you are so attuned that either you notice nothing unpleasant at all, or you take it as you would a passing band of music on a spring morning when your own pulses were dancing."

Pinturicchio is like a composer of whom one can say that inventiveness is not his forte, but he has perfect pitch and a thorough grasp of his instruments. Planes, interwoven perspectives, architecture, and landscape create a harmonious, complete unity. In the fresco representing Aeneas Piccolomini receiving a poetic wreath from the hands of Frederick III, the foreground is populated by an array of figures standing round the throne. Our glance runs up wide stairs constituting a horizon on which rests an openwork arcade, a fine finale for the composition. Through the arcades, as through binoculars, one can see a distant, finely modeled landscape—feathery trees, rounded bushes, paths among grasses.

Chłedowski rightly compares Pinturicchio's sequence to *The Courtier*. The scenes look as though taken from "the book of Count Baldassare Castiglione, written in a wise, scholarly and eloquent style." They are a perfect study of manners; and, as in the medieval *Mirrors*[24], reflect an ideal image of a pope, prince, knight, and burgher. The painter defines his society, its hierarchies, dependencies, and relationships not only through clothes or place in the composition. In the meeting of Frederick III with Eleanora of Portugal, we are given a complete spectrum of gestures: from the courtly affectations of sovereigns through the anxious animation of courtiers seated on well-groomed horses; the cocky arrogance of halberdiers to beggars—motionless piles of rags. Over this life hangs eternal good weather; and if rain falls from dark clouds upon the sea in *Cardinal Piccolomini's Departure*, it is only a skein of hair blown by the wind over a serene face.

I emerge from the cathedral into the hot, blinding square. Loud guides drive herds of tourists. Sweating farmers from a distant country film every piece of wall which the guide shows them and obediently manifest enthusiasm when touching ancient stones. They are so absorbed in producing copies that they have absolutely no time to look. They will visit Italy back home: colorful moving pictures that have nothing to do with reality. No one has a desire any longer to study things directly. A tireless mechanical eye multiplies emotions as thin as film.

The square to the left of the cathedral was named after Jacopo della Quercia[25]. In fact, it is the unfinished part of the cathedral whose vault is the sky. The construction of this wing began in 1339: the lofty cathedral did not seem grand enough, so burghers demanded its enlargement so that "Our Lord Jesus Christ and His Most Holy Mother, and the whole heavenly court, might be worshipped and blessed, and the self-government of the town forever admired." A beautiful example of mysticism wedded to the ambition of town councilors.

The majestic plan remained unexecuted; it was hindered by the Black Death and errors in construction. The walls, thin as leaves, were erected by a goldsmith, Lando di Pietro, with a

lightness typical of his trade, so that they began to crack and threatened collapse. Experts from hostile Florence were invited. (Ignominy! The cathedral in Siena was supposed to be a retort to the Duomo in Florence.) One of their reports contained a merciless verdict: the cracking walls should be demolished. But the Sienese refrained from doing so. Not because they loved ruins. It is also hard to believe that for seven centuries they deluded themselves that work could be recommenced. It is simply difficult to part with a dream.

Through the unfinished nave vaulted with blue, I descend into the busy Via di Città. Sienese streets are narrow, without pavements. A certain chronicler remarked, with some exaggeration, that passing horsemen scraped the walls with their spurs. I was constantly amazed by the buses maneuvering in these narrows as if the walls parted in front of them.

If anything in Siena is ugly, it can only be the Piazza Matteotti, a huge, shapeless hotel with a stable of cars and a café under a colorful canopy, anonymous as the banks that surround it, and offensively modern in this dignified medieval town. I entered, attracted by a singing voice. The Italian song once again claims its rightful place in the world. It has assimilated modern rhythms but adorned them with old sentiments. Hence the speeding vehicle of emotion carries both *sole* and *arcobaleno, luna* and tears. A small, dark-haired boy has just stepped up to the microphone. A provincial Modugno[26], who in Poland could perform at the Palace of Culture[27]. Next comes a very pretty girl. When she sings, her breasts heave and her eyelids flutter. I drink campari-soda, a red poison tasting of absinthe that makes the tongue stiffen and the throat burn. If it were not so expensive, I would have another and ask the singer for “The Red Poppies of Monte Cassino[28].” She would certainly know it.

I return to my “Tre Donzelle,” but just as I reach the gate, I turn toward the Campo. Everything is as it should be. The walls of the Town Hall stand, etched sharply in the night, its tower as beautiful as yesterday. I can go to bed. Explosions mushroom all over the earth, but maybe we shall manage to

make a couple of rotations around the sun—with this salvaged cathedral, this palace, this painting.

3

Cor magis tibi Sena pandit

(Siena opens her heart to you; inscription on the Camollia Gate)

THIS DAY IS DEVOTED to the Pinacoteca. It doesn't open until ten in the morning. So I have a little time to take a walk around Siena. Only towns in which you can get lost are worth their name. In Siena one can be lost like a needle in a haystack. In Via Galuzza houses are linked by arches, one walks on the bedrock of a canyon; it smells of stones, cats, and the Middle Ages.

In the thick shade of the narrow little Via Banchi di Sopra and Via di Città, among houses the color of smoky brick, one comes across palaces at every turn. This word, usually associated with plaster festoons, little columns, and stone bubbles, has little in common with Sienese civil architecture. The patrician houses, austere and devoid of ornamentation, give the impression of being fortresses in the midst of a city. Without historical commentary one can imagine the social position of the powerful families: Salimbeni, Piccolomini, Saracini. "Such a building was not only a masterpiece of art, but also a seat and shelter for allies; and even today, in the deluge of indifferent and anonymous crowds, this unconquerable palace stands full of scorn and aristocratic pride, so that you see nothing next to it, in fact there is nothing." A comment on the oldest palace here, Palazzo Tolomei, built at the beginning of the thirteenth century, whose austere stone cube has been emanating undisturbed serenity and strength for seven centuries.

The Pinacoteca is in the Palazzo Buonsignori and though connoisseurs say that the best Sassetta[29] can be found in

Washington, it provides a unique survey of Sienese painting.

It all begins in the mysterious period of art prior to the appearance of artists known by name. The scope of knowledge with which we leave school is limited to the narrow theater of European history. (For generations we have cultivated a contemptuous attitude towards Byzantium, and with pedantic relish discuss "flourishing" periods, immunizing our mind and imagination against epochs of "darkness" and complexity.) The story of dead civilizations like those of Crete or Etruria, the birth of Europe after the fall of the Roman Empire, are often passed over in favor of detailed lists of Julius Caesar's conquests. Art textbooks devote more space to the Periclean age and the Renaissance than to the extraordinary art of Sumeria or early Romanesque art. The whole schoolbag of "knowledge" proves completely useless when we try to make sense, not of isolated epochs, but of the historical process as a continuum.

Nothing is more touching than looking at the Sienese primitives from the depths of the Duocento. The preserved pieces are more polychrome reliefs than paintings. Madonnas with huge eyes, peasant features—solid like the Madonnas in Tatra roadside shrines—or a crucified Christ, whose bright colors time has stripped, leaving only delicate pinks and blues. In accordance with an order from the Synod of Rome in 692, Christ's face expresses no pain. His budding smile is full of sweetness and melancholy. This special glow of sensuality and mysticism will irradiate the eyes of Sienese saints and townswomen for centuries.

A heated and barren controversy has been smoldering for centuries: which of the two schools of art, Sienese or Florentine, can be considered older. Vasari grants precedence to Florence, but more recent research discovered a Sienese painting from 1215. A *paliotto* rather than a painting, a painted altar relief portraying Christ, the history of the Cross, and St. Helena. These small narratives have a distinctive Romanesque quality. It is certain that the Sienese school was well established in Italy at the beginning of the thirteenth century, many decades before Duccio. Although the very notion of an "artistic school" has been called into question by

contemporary scholars, its use is justified in reference to Siena, where we see an unusual unity of style and tradition. This fact has given rise to many misunderstandings. The Sienese school was reproached (as if it could be a reproach) for remaining too long under the influence of Byzantium—and even when the Greek pattern was broken, Sienese artists retained their decorative sense and an inclination toward refined mannerism. The Sienese painters were lyrical poets in their portraits and charming storytellers in their group scenes. The city was a republic of poets.

Art criticism does not content itself with the analysis of individual works but tries to trace their makers, creating "circles" and hypothetical figures. The first historically verified artist was Guido da Siena[30], a figure of strong personality and wide influence, like Cimabue in Florence. The Pinacoteca holds a number of outstanding works by this subtle Byzantine and his school. Especially beautiful is the *St. Peter paliotto* deriving from the 1280s.

Byzantine, or Byzantinist, painting is by no means confined to one rigid convention. Our eyes are trained to react to sharp contrasts, overlooking half-tones. The work of those who succeeded Guido was a substantial step forward, incorporating a greater scale of color tones saturated with light. "One has to capture the human emotion permeating the rhythms and space of these little stories." Placed against the background of abstract architecture, the story of the *Annunciation* is told with refined simplicity. The gold of the background is rich, ranging from the delicate glow of dawn to the chill of glittering metal.

Duccio is represented by the *Madonna dei Francescani*, painted at the end of the thirteenth century, that is before the *Great Maestà*. It is an example of a fortunate symbiosis of Byzantine painting and the Gothic style. The composition of the *Madonna* is quite free: her right hand rests gently on her knees. Her throne is a comfortable chair, not a massive and elaborate edifice. The angels are light, as though molded by the pale fingers of a miniaturist. Three monks, brown and dry as crickets, cling to the Madonna's feet. Wise Duccio, unlike Giotto, did not break the Greek pattern, but bent it towards his own times like a branch.

Simone Martini is absent from the Pinacoteca; this popular and probably most widely traveled Sienese has bequeathed magnificent frescoes to his hometown. On the other hand the paintings of the Lorenzetti brothers are rather well represented. If the Pinacoteca caught fire, I would try to save two small paintings by Ambrogio: *Town by the Sea* and *Castle on the Shore of a Lake*. These two landscapes are unmatched in the Trecento, and few masters of later eras manage to create equally perfect works of pure art. Easier to say that than to explain it.

Town by the Sea—gray walls, green houses, red roofs and spires—is built of bright forms, tightly circumscribed by a diamond line. The space is three-dimensional; yet it has been said that "the refined structure of Ambrogio's perspective does not result from efforts to rationalize space, but though it may seem paradoxical, aims to bring the depths to the surface of the painting with lightning speed." It is a bird's-eye view of a landscape. The town is empty, as though it has just emerged from the waters of a deluge. It glows to the highest level of visibility immersed in amber-green light. The hallucinatory reality of the objects represented is so intense that I doubt this masterpiece can be penetrated by any analysis.

Guzzling paintings is as pointless as guzzling miles. Anyway, the museum guards are ringing their bells like mad because noon is ripening on the stem of the Town Hall's spire—and that means a plate of steaming pasta, a glass of wine, and a refreshing nap. Besides, the Lorenzetti brothers, who probably died of the Black Death, close the heroic period of Sienese painting.

As befits a medieval city, Siena was the cradle of numerous saints; no other Italian town can claim such a rich collection of haloed figures. One learned hagiographer provides an astronomical five hundred names. Siena was also the native town of nine popes. Yet its black and white seal speaks of contradictory passions, and it was also a town of squanderers, golden youths and women at whom priests thundered from their pulpits. The loudest thunderer was San Bernardino. Moved by his eloquence, the womenfolk burned their high-heeled shoes, perfumes, and mirrors on huge bonfires.

Mystical hymns brought heaven closer to earth; but one could also hear godless songs, and Siena had its own poet of earthly pleasures in the person of Folgore da San Gimignano[31]. Mendicant friars in worn robes wandered around the town, but just one company of spendthrifts could waste the stunning sum of two hundred thousand gold florins during a single feasting and hunting spree. "*Gente vana*"—Dante hisses.

Walking down the steep Via Fontebranda we enter the old district of tanners. Not far from the Porta Fontebranda there is a spring of the same name. Because water was in great demand in dry Siena—not a town of fountains like Rome—a washing basin was constructed and a loggia where Sienese women have been gossiping for nine centuries. Caterina Benincasa came here with her water jug. Later she became a saint.

She was the twenty-fifth child of a dyer. Her mother's name was like the opening of an aria: Mona Lapa di Puccio Piagenti. The girl, born in 1347, was a child of strong personality. She entered the Dominican order early, and soon became an outstanding figure in her hometown, in Italy and throughout the Christian world, though her legend and her apologists overestimate her influence on history.

Catherine tended the lepers, mortified her body, and got involved in politics on a scale one could call international. She attracted a group of lay adorers from various social backgrounds with whom she strolled around the surrounding fields in the direction of Florence—where the Tuscan landscape is ripe with olives, cypresses, and vineyards—or south, towards the place favored of anchorites, a little desert parched like a donkey's hide. She must have been a charming woman, for she was no beauty, judging by her portrait by Andrea Vanni[32] in the church of San Domenico.

Her mysticism was flavored with blood. In her dictated letters (she learnt to write only three years before her death, "*con molti sospiri e abbondanza di lagrime*"), two words reappear with striking frequency: *fuoco* and *sangue*. One day she accompanied a convict to his place of execution. Later she long held his severed head in her lap. "When the corpse was

taken away, my soul rested in sweet peace, and I relished the smell of blood." A contribution to medieval psychology.

The Sienese nun enjoyed an immense authority, but it was only moral authority. Because she lived in Europe, not in India, and in times of demoralization, cruelty, and corruption, her political influence was less important than historians thought until recently. The most notable things she did was visiting the court of Gregory XI in Avignon. In many ways Catherine resembled Joan of Arc. She too was a simple girl who claimed to hear the voice of God. Because she knew only the Tuscan dialect and was unversed in theology, she was an object of ridicule and humiliating insults on the part of French cardinals. It is not certain to what degree she influenced Gregory's decision to shift the papal capital back to Rome. More recent researchers claim that this return was decided in advance of Catherine's visit to Avignon.

Towards the end of her short life she used all her fading powers to support Urban VI, not the best of popes, in his struggle against Clement VII. Her political actions were always a clash of her naive greatness with her sober shrewdness. She wrote hundreds of letters to prominent figures, sometimes harsh, sometimes sweet in tone. These letters had more or less the same effect as the protests of the League for the Defense of Human Rights do now. To free Italy from the cruel condottiere Sir John Hawkwood, alias Giovanni Acuto, she proposed he turn his cruelty against the Turks. She tried to conquer the world by love. She belongs to legend.

To the east, the church of San Domenico; to the west, another spiritual fortress of Siena, the austere, unadorned church of San Francisco, with a searing composition by Pietro Lorenzetti[5]: *The Crucifixion*. In the immediate vicinity of the church once stood the pulpit of San Bernardino, whose sermons, transcribed by his listeners, are full of verve, humor, and terrific genre scenes.

I return to the Pinacoteca.

By the middle of the fourteenth century, the great epoch of Sienese painting was coming to a close. Though the school existed without interruption until the end of the fifteenth

century, until the city's final political downfall, such phenomena as Duccio, Martini, and Lorenzetti no longer occurred. But almost throughout its history Sienese painting managed to maintain an outstanding unity of style, which we seek in vain in the Florentine school.

Sienese art, though rarely reflecting immediate reality, was closely connected with social life. Siena had no great patrons like the Medici, but interest in art was more popular and democratic than anywhere else. A rich guild of clothiers ordered a polyptych from expensive Sassetta; bakers and butchers were customers of Mattea di Giovanni[33]; but one of the poorer guilds, the lathers', had to content itself with what Andrea Niccolò offered to paint for them. A rare, happy example of the marriage of bureaucracy and art was the custom of asking outstanding artists to illustrate the wooden covers of the Biccherna's account books.

The beginning of the Quattrocento sees the emergence of one of the most charming painters in the history of art: Sassetta. His paintings are dispersed throughout the world, but the Pinacoteca holds a few that well represent this illustrator of the life of St. Francis. Sassetta captured the essence of the Franciscan legend with magnificent accuracy because he himself was up to his ears in the miraculous. In the story about St. Francis and the poor knight, a tower uprooted like an oak soars above the town, the angels, and other participants of the drama; and we are not offended by the surrealist effect, so much does Sassetta mix the material with the impossible. And in fact the surrealists could learn from him the art of endowing miracles with physical reality. It is often said that Sassetta and his colleagues were anachronistic and did not understand the Renaissance. In fact, they entered the new world of the Renaissance without breaking the Gothic tradition, just as the Gothic Duccio did not break with the Byzantine tradition. Sassetta's art is not mannerist, it is the rethinking of the tradition of his great predecessors.

He was a prolific painter and often left Siena. He was in touch with old and new sources of art. Contemporary art

historians stress his connections with Domenico Veneziano[34] and his influence on the great Piero della Francesca.

He died on April 1, 1450, having contracted pneumonia during his work on a fresco that adorned the Porta Romana till 1944. The course of his posthumous fame is very instructive. At the end of the nineteenth century he was counted among the third-rate painters. Berenson brought him out of oblivion by ascribing to him a number of works considered anonymous. More recently, Alberto Graziani "deprived" Sassetta of some paintings by creating a new hypothetical figure called *Maestro dell'Osservanza* (the name of a monastery near Siena). Graziani acted like an astronomer who calculates the existence of a new star long before observing it. One of the most beautiful paintings of this master is *St. Anthony's Meeting with St. Paul*. A road leads among forested hills. First one sees the small figure of the saint with a tiny stick on his back entering the forest. Later, or in the center of the painting, he talks with a faun; both interlocutors are well-mannered and must be avoiding questions of dogma, as the conversation is held in an obviously friendly atmosphere. Finally, on the very rim of the painting, the two saints embrace warmly in front of a hermit's cave.

Sassetta's brush was inherited by his pupil, Sano di Pietro[35], who ran the largest atelier in Siena. He could not equal his master (being less subtle and more sentimental), but what a marvelous teller of anecdotes! He is well represented in the Pinacoteca. From Sassetta he inherited his love of reds, and he played them *con brio*. The narrative passion was shared by all Sienese painters, but Sano di Pietro was the storyteller of storytellers. One of his paintings tells the story of Pope Calixtus III's vision of the Madonna. The two figures occupy three-quarters of the painting. The artist also painted a muleteer with burdened donkeys. One of the floppy-eared creatures is just disappearing behind the pink gate of Siena. Contrasted with the grave solemnity of the main themes, this detail is overwhelmingly comic, like a witty *Zwischenruf*[36] dropped casually in the middle of a ceremonial speech.

One of the most seductive painters of the Sienese Quattrocento was Neroccio[37], an artist of delicate color and Chinese precision of line; perhaps the last artist whose work still echoed the linear precision of Simone Martini.

And here we enter the declining period of the Sienese school; with Vecchietta[38] and Sodoma[39]—the latter appeared suddenly, seemingly without introduction—we step into the fading Renaissance.

The paintings by Sodoma shown in the Pinacoteca cannot win one over, even though one knows that he was a disciple of Leonardo, and that his career was often fortunate. Here we see him fat and vulgar; his forms suffer from dropsy. The composition of *The Swoon of St. Catherine* is heavy and pretentious; its sandy coloring is insipid. *Christ Tied to a Column* has the hefty torso of an ancient gladiator; but the painting is devoid of power and expression, though Enzo Carli claims that in spite of everything this is the finest and most sensitive interpretation of Leonardo's *sfumato* and *chiaroscuro*. Sodoma was a prolific painter, oscillating between the styles of the young Perugino and the young Raphael; but one rather agrees with Berenson that "his oeuvre as a whole is pitifully weak."

I console myself that Sodoma was not a Sienese, for he was born in Lombardy. He was ennobled by the Pope and settled in Siena, where he became an official painter. Vasari, a gossip it is true, gives him bad credits as artist and man. He was an eccentric, a bohemian in the fin-de-siècle style. It is rumored that he had a domesticated, talking jackdaw, three parrots, and as many shrewish wives. He adored horses like a native Sienese, and this passion cost him large sums. In one of his paintings he portrayed himself near Raphael, an indication that he held an exaggerated opinion of his own talent. His end, in a Sienese hospital, is said to have been miserable. Before his death he wrote a testament in the manner of Villon.

The last of the Sienese painters was Beccafumi. One looks at him with real regret. Of the once magnificent school only colorful smoke is left. And that was the end of the Sienese Republic. The civilization of the city of the she-wolf was

sinking like an island. Beccafumi locks up Sienese art and tosses the key into the abyss of time.

I go out into a town preparing for its daily passeggiata, but I cannot stop thinking about painters dead for centuries. I suddenly recall a figure from Ambrogio Lorenzetti's fresco in the Palazzo Pubblico. It was an allegory of Peace: a casually seated woman in a white robe, her form defined by a single line, which stays forever under your eyelids. Where did I see women painted like that? Of course, in the canvases of Henri Matisse. Matisse—the last Sienese?

I speak of paintings but I'm also thinking about poetry. The Sienese school was an example of how to develop individual talent without breaking with the past. It achieved what Eliot writes about when he analyzes the concept of tradition which we Poles associate, not only in theory but also in practice, with academicism.

"It cannot be inherited, and if you want it you must obtain it by great labour. It involves, in the first place, the historical sense, which we may call nearly indispensable to anyone who would continue to be a poet beyond his twenty-fifth year; and the historical sense involves a perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence; the historical sense compels a man to write not merely with his own generation in his bones, but with a feeling that the whole of the literature of his own country has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order." Also, "No poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone,…you must set him, for contrast and comparison, among the dead."

A small trattoria fills with a crowd of regular customers. They enter, take their own serviettes from a shelf under a clock, sit at their own places among their own companions. They eat spaghetti, drink wine, chat, play cards and throw dice with an expertise and gusto which seems to have been intensifying from generation to generation. Their conversation is animated. Italian is probably the most exclamatory of all languages and those *via, veh, ahi, ih* explode like firecrackers. I guess that the subject is the Palio. The Palio is a week from now.

The name comes from a piece of painted silk, the annual prize for the horse race around the Campo. Every year on June 2nd and August 16th the town turns into a great historical theater which would have delighted Chesterton. Three city districts, the so-called *terzi*—Città, San Martino, and Camollia—delegate their own riders. It is a relic of a medieval military organization which divided the city into seventeen *contrade*, small military communities, each one with its commander, its church, its banner and seal. Twice a year emotions soar, high bets are made, complicated plots are woven around the probable winner, and all this is for real, not just for tourists. The feast is colorful, full of tumult, horses, and confusion. Yes, history has been reduced to a costume and war, a cavalcade around the marketplace.

I ask the padrone of the trattoria for a better wine. He brings last year's Chianti from his own vineyard, saying that his family has owned this vineyard for four hundred years and this is the best Chianti in Siena. And now he watches me from behind the counter to see what I will do with this noble vintage.

One has to swirl the glass gently to see how the wine flows down its walls, if it leaves any traces. Next, one has to raise it and—to use the words of a French gourmand—sink one's eyes into the live rubies and contemplate them like a Chinese sea full of corals and algae. The third gesture: bring the rim of the glass to the lower lip and inhale the *mammola*—the bouquet of violets announcing to the nostrils that the chianti is good. Inhale it to the bottom of your lungs, as if to ingest the fragrance of ripe grapes and earth. Finally—without barbarian haste—take a little sip and spread the dark, chamois taste on your palate.

I smile at the padrone with approbation. A great lamp of joyful pride lights above his head. Life is beautiful and people are good. For the main course I order *bistecca alla Bismarck*. It is leathery. No wonder—it goes way back.

This is my last evening in Siena. I go to the Campo to throw a few lire into the Fonte Gaia, though to tell the truth, I have little hope of returning. Later I say "addio" to the Palazzo

Pubblico and the Torre del Mangia, for who else do I have to say it to. *"Auguri, Siena, tanti auguri."*

Returning to the "Tre Donzelle," I have a great desire to wake the maid to tell her I am leaving tomorrow and that I had a good time here. If I were not afraid of the word, I would say that I was happy. But I do not know if she would understand me.

I go to bed with Ungaretti's[40] poems. In one I find a very appropriate farewell:

Again I see your slow mouth
(The sea flows to meet it in the night)
And the mare of your loins
Hurling you in agony
Into my singing arms,
And a sleep retrieving you
To colored things and new deaths
And the cruel solitude
That every lover finds within himself,
Now an endless grave,
Divides me from you for ever.
Dear one, distant as in a mirror…

A STONE FROM THE CATHEDRAL

THE TRAIN PULLED up at the Gare du Nord just before midnight. At the exit I was accosted by a little man offering me a hotel. But it seemed sacrilege to spend my first night in Paris in bed. Besides, the little man was red-haired, and therefore suspect. “Il y a du louche dans cette affaire[1],” I thought. I deposited my suitcase in the left-luggage office and ventured into the city equipped with a French-Polish dictionary and The Guide to Europe (second edition, revised and expanded by the Academic Touring Club, Lvov 1909).

This invaluable publication from my father’s library was my introduction to the mysteries of Paris. It was written when the city’s transportation consisted of omnibuses drawn by three white horses, the Polish pension of pani Pióro still prospered on rue de l’Estrapade, and the “Institute of Honor and Bread[2],” founded in 1862, still conducted its charitable activities under the presidency of Zamojski[3]. The cultural information in the guide was scarce, but to the point. For instance: theaters are numerous, but prices steep, and one should not invite ladies to the gallery. Under “Museums and Curiosities” the guide reserved first place for Les Égouts, the sewers, especially since free tickets were issued at the Town Hall. The most tantalizing item was a recommendation to visit the morgue near Notre-Dame. “Unidentified bodies are displayed there. Frozen, they can be preserved for up to three months.”

I walked straight ahead, along the Boulevard Sébastopol dazed by the commotion of people, vehicles, and lights. I wanted to reach the Seine at all costs. The experience of a man from the provinces whispered to me that it should be quieter on the other side of the river. I crossed a bridge and found

myself on the Île de la Cite. And indeed, it was dark and peaceful. It started raining. I passed the Conciergerie, a gloomy edifice, like an illustration from Victor Hugo, and reached a square facing the illuminated Cathedral of Notre-Dame. Then it happened. I realized that I would never write my dissertation on Paul Valéry and that, to the despair of my literary friends I would return home unaware of what the most fashionable French poet of the season was like.

I found quarters near the cathedral, on the Île Saint-Louis. After a few days, taking advantage of the reduced fares on Sundays, I went to Chartres. Here my fate as a lover of the Gothic was sealed. From that moment I used every opportunity to realize my insane plan of visiting all the French cathedrals. Naturally the project remained uncompleted, but I managed to see the most important ones: Senlis, Tours, Noyon, Laon, Lyon, Châlons-sur-Marne, Reims, Rouen, Beauvais, Amiens, Bourges. After these excursions, I returned to Paris as if from mountain expeditions and dug into books at the Bibliothèque Sainte-Geneviève. Naively I first searched for a formula which would explain the Gothic in its totality, the thing that is at once its construction, symbolism, and metaphysics. But prudent scholars did not provide an unequivocal answer.

The idea of this sketch came in Chartres when I stood on a stone porch of the so-called Clocher Neuf. The passing clouds overhead gave an illusion of flight. Under my feet was a huge, mossy sandstone block with a small arrow—the mark of a mason. Perhaps instead of writing about stained glass modulating light as Gregorian chant modulates silence, about mysterious chimeras meditating above the abyss of time, it would be worth ruminating on how these stones were raised; and hence about bricklayers, stonemasons, and architects. Not about what possessed their souls when they erected this cathedral but about the materials they used, their tools and tricks and how much they earned. A humble aim, an accountant’s view of the Gothic, but the Middle Ages also teach modesty.

Over the centuries the Gothic has been humiliated, belittled like no other great style in the history of art. People didn’t

understand it, so they hated it. Critics bombarded it with derisive epithets, in the way Napoleon's soldiers bombarded the face of the Sphinx. The wigs of the classicists stood on end at the sight of these insane edifices. "Everywhere windows, rosettes, spikes; the stones seem to be cut like cardboard; everything is riddled with holes, everything hangs in the air."

The matter did not end in verbal polemics. Napoleon III had scores of Gothic churches recklessly dismantled in the very heart of Paris. Barbaric demolition plans started at the beginning of the nineteenth century. Their only concern was to get rid of these "masterpieces of bad taste" as cheaply as possible. In the eighteenth century one of the most beautiful Gothic churches, St. Nicaise, was torn down, as well as the cathedral in Cambrai and many others. There was no mercy for "the style of the Goths," which "had been governed by whimsicality devoid of nobility and poisoned the fine arts"—in the words of the encyclopedist *chevalier* de Jaucourt[4].

Millions, millions of tons of stone. Between the eleventh and fourteenth centuries more stone was excavated in France than in ancient Egypt. The eighty cathedrals and five hundred big churches built in this period, taken together, would form a mountain range erected by human hands.

In one of my books I saw a drawing of the façade of a Greek temple imposed on the façade of a Gothic cathedral. From that drawing you could deduce that many an Acropolis could be contained, as in a suitcase, inside cathedrals like Amiens or Reims. However, little results from such comparisons, at least little that would tell us about the functions of sacred buildings in such different periods. The *templum* of antiquity housed the gods; cathedrals house the faithful. The immortals are always less numerous than the believers.

The surface of a great cathedral is about four to five thousand square meters; therefore it could easily contain the inhabitants of an entire town, including pilgrims. Since such an undertaking demanded immense expenditures, one should start with the finances.

NO WRITTEN SOURCES SUGGEST that these large-scale works proceeded according to an estimated budget. The romantic principle of measuring one's forces after one's plans dominated medieval book-keeping. Besides, in the beginning there was plenty of money, thanks to the colossal enthusiasm of the faithful for whom a cathedral was also the focus of local patriotism. Later there were ups and downs.

This explains why so few cathedrals were maintained in a uniform style and built in one sweep. Let us add one more thing. The costs exceeded the means at the disposal of any individual, even if he were the sovereign. In order to secure a regular supply of money, the popes of the thirteenth century demanded that churches contribute a quarter of their income to construction work. However, this order was not always obeyed. Thus rulers like Johann of Bohemia transferred revenues from the royal silver mines. City councils did not want to be left behind. In 1292 a census was conducted in Orvieto and a graduated income tax imposed to finance the construction of the Duomo. The register of donors for Milan Cathedral has been preserved. It covers all professions and social strata, courtesans included. The donations were often in kind. The Queen of Cyprus, for example, endowed one of the Italian cathedrals with a magnificent cloth of gold. Charitable fever was occasionally the cause of family feuds. A certain Italian citizen demanded the return of his gold buttons, donated by his wife for construction work.

Near church entrances, great stalls were opened in which donations could be purchased, from precious stones to hens.

Charity collectors traveled to distant lands to secure building funds. To erect their abbey in Sylvanès the Cistercians sought assistance from the Emperor of Constantinople, the King of Sicily, and the Duke of Champagne. Believers established brotherhoods to help finance work in progress. The most picturesque of these was probably the "brotherhood of bowlers" from Xanten, as one might translate "confrèrie des joueurs de boule." The membership must have been quite respectable, as the fraternity

included a bishop. And one should not overlook the income from the sale of spiritual values. Indulgences, in other words. In 1487 one-third of the expenses of St. Victor's Collegiate church in Xanten was covered by this merchandise. The right to grant indulgences was not free either. In 1397 the citizens of Milan bought "*unam bonam indulgentiam*" from the Pope for five hundred florins.

Collections, especially when conducted far from the building-sites, were usually accompanied by expeditions with holy relics, which were great holidays for every town visited. One can see it clearly in miniatures: processions with relics move along streets crowded with kneeling believers. The sick stretch out their hands, mothers with children push through the crowd to touch the miracle.

The Church protested against the cult of holy objects even before Boccaccio began to ridicule it. In 1216 the Lateran Council forbade the veneration of holy relics without special consent. One must admire, nevertheless, the immense initiative and courage of the collectors. In 1112, after fire had seriously damaged the cathedral in Laon, seven canons gathered the surviving relics: a patch from the Virgin Mary's dress, a piece of sponge given to Christ on the Cross, a splinter from the Holy Cross. After processions through several French cities, the pilgrims returned with a sum which seemed to be sufficient for the completion of the work. Alas, the funds rapidly ran out and another expedition was undertaken. Its story could provide the plot for a fascinating historical novel: a sea journey with pirates, thieves, and treacherous Flemish clothiers. After seven months of wandering and adventure, the travelers returned safely with a sum which allowed the cathedral to be completed in less than a year. Not everywhere was the balance of expenditure and income maintained so successfully. In work reports we often find the melancholy statement: "Nothing is happening on the construction site. No money."

ANOTHER IMPORTANT PROBLEM THE builders of cathedrals faced was transportation. Its means had not changed since antiquity: water routes and carts pulled by mules and horses. If the quarry was a few dozen kilometers from the construction site, as in Chartres, one team delivered daily a small portion of stone, fifteen hundred kilograms, roughly one cubic meter.

A French proverb says: “a castle destroyed is a castle half built.” More than one Gothic cathedral stone came from the fortifications and civilian buildings of the Roman Empire. In order to erect the huge church of St. Albans, the remains of the ancient town of Verulamium were demolished. The examples can be multiplied without end. Chronicles record instances of the miraculous discovery of deposits of building materials, as in Pontoise, which aided the construction of Saint-Denis. But it was not a common occurrence. Ancient columns, capitals, blocks of pink and white marble were shipped down the Rhine, the Rhône, and the Arno. Proud and mighty Venice sent its sailing-ships in search of building materials for the construction of San Marco as far as Sicily, Athens, Constantinople, Asia Minor, even Africa.

What were the transportation costs? If the material came from places dozens or more kilometers away, its price rose four or five times. In the Caen quarry a unit of stone cost one pound, six shillings and eight pence. When it arrived at the building-site of Norwich cathedral, its price was four pounds, eight shillings and eight pence. It has been calculated that the overall cost of many cathedrals could have been cut by half if it had not been for the cost of freight. So the demolition of old buildings was not blind vandalism but a hard economic necessity. It was understood quite early on that the only way of reducing transportation costs was to refine the material at the quarries so that it could be delivered directly to the building-site ready for use, lighter than the irregular, rough blocks. So stonemasons and craftsmen went off to quarries, where they labored under the guidance of architects. This increasingly popular practice led in Britain to the birth of businesses producing ready-made blocks or even sculptures.

We should not ignore the most original means of transportation, which probably existed only in the Middle Ages: the backs and shoulders of faithful volunteers. Before pilgrims reached the famous Santiago di Compostella, everybody was given a portion of limestone in the town of Triacastella, which they had to transport to the kilns in Castaneda. A frequently-quoted letter to Abbot Haimon of Chartres, dating from 1145, describes a crowd of men and women of all estates (which more critical commentators see as hyperbole) pulling carts full of "wine, wheat, stone, wood and other things necessary for life and building the church." Thousands marched in great silence. On reaching their destination they sung hymns and confessed their sins. This picture of voluntary work is complemented by many other literary texts. During the construction of the cathedral in Vézelay, Bertha, the wife of Duke Girat de Roussillon[5] leaves her marital bed at night. Full of suspicion, the Duke follows his spouse:

Et voit venir de loign la dame et ses ancelles

Et de ses plus privées pucelles damoiselles,

Qui venoient tout chargié de sablon et d'arène

Si qu'elles ne pouvoient monter fort qu'à grant peine.

However, one should deal ruthlessly with these charming stories, even though they were undoubtedly truthful in rendering the mood, social background, and the miraculous atmosphere surrounding the construction of cathedrals. But did they have any bearing on the progress of the construction itself? Careful scholars voice their doubts. The masses inspired by the purest enthusiasm were certainly not the decisive factor in the great architectural battle.

Not chronicles, but stained glass, miniatures, and prints are an inexhaustible source of information about the fate of the material when it finally reached the construction site. The

theme of the Tower of Babel, much favored in the Middle Ages, provides many particularly valuable indications.

Stones and mortar were carried by workers on their shoulders, or hoisted by a simple system of pulleys. Huge ramps resting on the ground with rising levels of construction, which had been used since antiquity, could not be constructed due to the density of buildings surrounding the cathedrals. Scaffolding did not rest on the ground; it resembled swallows' nests hanging at dazzling heights. At the top of unfinished walls one could see cranes and primitive lifts. Ropes carrying stones were reeled on drums below, like those of village wells today. Great wheels moved by workers" feet were also used. Churches in Alsace and English cathedrals hold collections of these simple machines. Nothing indicates that the Middle Ages witnessed the invention of anything that could replace or even alleviate the effort of human muscles. Gothic cathedrals were the work of man's hands in the most literal sense.

The range of tools was also very basic: a saw to cut sandstone blocks, different kinds of hammers with sharp or blunt heads, trowels, and measuring tools—set square, angle-gauge, plumb-line. It is not certain when the broad-edged chisel appeared—perhaps as late as the fourteenth century. The cathedral builders' tool-kit was not much different from that of the builders of the Acropolis.

That was not, however, the primary factor slowing down the work tempo. The weak points of these ambitious endeavors were finances and transportation (*lenta convectico columnarum*). The construction of the cathedral at Chartres took fifty years, at Amiens—sixty, Notre-Dame—eighty, Reims—ninety, Bourges—a hundred years. Almost no cathedral was finished within the lifetime of those who dreamt of their spires in the clouds.

THE OUTSTANDING BELGIAN MEDIEVALIST Henri Pirenne drew an analogy between the dynamism of European society in the eleventh and twelfth centuries and of mid-nineteenth century America. The construction of the great

Gothic cathedrals is unthinkable without the development of cities and changes in the economic structure. Land ceases to be the sole source of wealth; the value of commodities grows, trade develops, banks are founded.

The Church looked unfavorably upon those who established fortunes not through physical labor or inheritance, but through intelligent schemes. Such people in turn had little choice but to offer a part of their income for some sublime purpose. Though it is perhaps a partial truth, one can risk the claim that Gothic buildings were born of the bad conscience of the emerging bourgeoisie.

The cathedrals were objects of pride and tokens of power visible from a great distance. And also places for meetings and activities of quite secular character. Medieval man felt at home in a church. He ate, slept, and talked there without lowering his voice; and because there were no benches, people walked around freely and gladly took shelter from inclement weather. Church interdictions on secular meetings in churches indicate that they were fairly frequent. The fact that town halls were not built in many towns with cathedrals or large churches seems to support this thesis. Stained-glass windows exalted not only the lives of saints but, if we may compare great with the small, functioned as advertising signs for mercers, carpenters, and cobblers. We know that a good location for a donated stained-glass window was the object of bitter struggles. “Good” meant closest to the eyes of a potential customer.

It is remarkable that kings and dukes played so modest a role in the construction of cathedrals, especially as regards personal involvement in work-in-progress. With the exception of exclusively royal temples, like Sainte-Chapelle or Westminster, a monarch’s role was usually limited to financial donations, rare visits to building-sites, and occasionally sending court architects to give advice. That was all.

In England, France, and Germany the fate of these projects remained the concern of abbots and bishops; in Italy, city councils. Abbot Suger[6] is an example and symbol of those who sacrificed their time, energy, and talent for a cathedral.

One can easily envision him in discussions with goldsmiths and painters, deciding the iconography of stained glass, climbing scaffolding, leading expeditions of lumberjacks to a nearby forest in search of suitable timber. Thanks to him the construction of Saint-Denis took only three years and three weeks, a speed record unchallenged for many centuries. Sully was another such patron for Notre-Dame, Bishop Évrart de Fouilloy for Amiens, Gautier de Mortagne for Auxerre.

But even one man's unlimited energy and enthusiasm could not secure adequate supervision for such immense endeavors. Institutions were founded, differently named in different countries: *fabrique, oeuvre, Werk, work, opera.* They looked after the whole complex machinery of management and accounts, controlled funds, hired artists and workers, stored plans. Chapters delegated one or two clergymen who were then called *custos fabricae, magister fabricae, magister operis*. They were not technicians, as one might guess from those names, but administrators. The administration in turn divided and specialized. In France *la fabrique* controlled the financial, *l'oeuvre* the technical side of construction. In time these new administrative organisms gained considerable autonomy, especially in Italy where city councils played a decisive role in the construction of cathedrals.

LET US LOOK MORE closely at the people working on a building-site. They constituted a small, hierarchical society. At the bottom of this pyramid we see workers, depicted in miniatures climbing ladders, carrying stones and mortar in yokes, or patiently turning the wheels of pulleys. They were mainly runaway peasants, sons from large country families, who set off for towns in search of bread and freedom. The unskilled did the hardest work: digging foundations sometimes as deep as ten meters, and transporting materials. They were spurred, especially the younger and more enterprising ones, by the hope that one day someone else would take over their yoke and that they would lay stones at the top of the cathedral. Economic incentives played an important role. A stone-porter

or a digger earned seven denarii a day; a stone-layer, twenty-two denarii.

Should we be surprised that they looked with animosity at those who volunteered for this work, like His Grace Renaud de Montauban[7], who sought expiation for his sins in hard labor? *Chanson de geste des quatre fils Aymon* says that when the workers collected their daily pay in the evening, Renaud took only one denarius. Not that he was a bad worker. On the contrary, he worked like three men, so that the stonemasons vied for his help. He was called "the worker of St. Peter," but after eight days desperate co-workers hit him over the head with a heavy mallet and threw his body into the Rhine. The important lesson of this bloody story: the number of unskilled laborers was large and the struggle for employment was ruthless. The ratio of unskilled to skilled was three to one, four to one, and even greater. The abbots of Ramsey sneered at those who sought employment not out of piety but for love of money, "*par l'amour de la paie,*" but we don't find it so shocking.

Viewed from the outside, we might think that an abyss divided foremen from workers; yet this was not so. Gothic cathedrals were great improvisations, demanding something resembling an organic bond between all the participants in the construction. This resulted from the very nature of the material. A stone, hewn on the ground, had to reach a precise spot above; unlike a brick, it was not an interchangeable element. That is probably why accounts—organized not according to pay differentials, but modeled on farm book-keeping—show evidence of clearly defined work units. Immediately below the master stone-layer were his assistants —*valets, compagnons, serviteurs*—who of necessity had to learn the craft, if only such simple tasks as mixing mortar. Plaster craftsmen can already be found on a list of trades compiled by Étienne Boileau[8].

The higher group included bricklayers and all kinds of artisans working in stone, wood, lead, or iron. They were the constructors. Stone-layers had the responsible job of fitting the stones. Their names are well represented in the English terms:

“setter” and “layer.” Their skills determined whether an arch would support the weight of a vault, whether a keystone would not crumble. Miniatures portray them at the top of cathedrals with trowels, levels, plumb-lines. Their names disappear from the paylists in winter, when they abandoned the building-site, leaving the walls protected with straw and twigs to keep off the cold and damp.

On the other hand, we know next to nothing about those who worked in the quarries. They are rarely mentioned and their trade is absent from Étienne Boileau’s detailed register. They were underpaid and worked under the worst conditions —the unknown soldiers of the cathedral-building crusades. Yet without them who labored in the dark and damp, without them who cut the negatives of the cathedrals in rock, what was created to enchant human eyes would be unthinkable.

The quarries were usually exploited before the digging of foundations. Groups of eight workers toiled under the direction of a foreman who was paid much better than they, and per piece of cut stone. Their speed of work must have been considerable, as we can deduce from reports from the quarries of the Cistercian abbey in King’s Vale in Cheshire. A loaded cart left the quarry every fifteen minutes.

IN 1277 WALTER DE Chereford, the head of works in King’s Vale, had the idea of building a shed for stonemasons. He did not expect that the future “French lodge” would have a brilliant political career. Its beginnings were prosaic and practical. Its purpose was to provide for those who cut stone and prepared fragments of sculptures a place to take their meals and shelter from the elements. One did not live in it. On the other hand it is certain that the mason’s shed became the site of professional discussions. We know that the first consisted of fourteen hundred planks, so it was rather small, with primitive arrangements inside. There is also a document concerning the intervention of the bishop’s guard, summoned to temper the emotions of the disputing craftsmen. This took place not in England but in France during the construction of

Notre-Dame, as the habit of building lodges quickly spread to other countries.

In Van Eyck's painting of St. Barbara, the patron saint of builders, the lodge, or shed, looks like a birdcage beside the huge temple. And in fact, it could hold no more than twenty tradesmen. They were truly like migratory birds. The times knew no passports, so they often crossed the Channel, the Rhine, and even ventured to Palestine with the crusaders. Sometimes they were taken along by an architect like Etienne de Bonneuille[9], when he went to build the cathedral in Uppsala. The peregrinations of master craftsmen were caused not only by the need for adventure, but also by the search for better working conditions. Sometimes they fled from forced labor. It was mainly in England where, on royal orders, sheriffs conscripted master stonemasons and stonelayers needed for the erection of castles often hundreds of miles from their homes. And for an indefinite period. Cathedral builders, on the other hand, were free people.

Those who worked in stone were covered by a single French term *tailleurs de pierre*, referring to those who cut stone as well as those who made rosettes, arches, even sculpted statues. One of the mysteries of Gothic architecture is the fact, unimaginable to us, that these sculptors were not considered artists. They merged with the anonymous mass of stonemasons. Their personalities were curbed by the architect and the theologian. The Council of Nice decided in 787 that art was the matter of the artist, but the composition—or content, as we would say today—belonged to the Fathers. The sentence must have had more than declarative value since in 1306 a sculptor named Tideman was forced to remove from a London church his figure of Christ, which was found to be contrary to tradition, and even to return his fee.

The terminology used to denote different craftsmen is rather inadequate and misleading. Often it is not based on the function, but on the materials. Thus the English term "hard hewers" refers to artisans who worked in heavy stone from areas such as Kent, as opposed to those who chiseled delicate stone suitable for sculptures, called "freestone masons." (Later the shortened form "freemasons" was used, from which the

French word franc-maçon derives, though the latter was unknown in the Middle Ages and came into use only in the times of speculative freemasonry in the eighteenth century.) When we stand in front of the royal portal in Chartres, it is easy to see that the figures are made of a different stone, with a much finer grain, than the walls.

Work was regulated by the sundial. It started at dawn and stopped at dusk. English builders, we read in documents of the second half of the sixteenth century, in winter had one hour for lunch, with a fifteen-minute break in the afternoon. In summer: one hour for lunch and two thirty-minute breaks. In winter they worked eight to ten hours, in summer twelve hours. There were fifty holidays which, taken together with the Sundays, gave about two hundred and fifty days of effective labor.

In order to attract skilled workers, they were promised lodging at the inns. The first hotel for workers near Eton, *hospicium lathomorum*, with its own kitchen, appeared quite late, not until the seventeenth century.

The payroll was diverse. Knoop and Jones listed no less than seventeen different fees for builders in Caernavon in the years 1278 to 1280. Unskilled workers were paid day wages every evening. The craftsmen received their wages on Saturdays.

How much did they earn? A difficult question. We know how easy it is to prepare misleading tables, which will plainly demonstrate that we are doing all right, or have been better off, or that things are much better somewhere else. The matter is even more complicated when a remote epoch is involved. The minimum for human existence is so relative. Citing the work of a seemingly impartial French scholar, Pierre du Colombier, we shall only say that the material situation of workers in the Middle Ages was far better than at the end of the nineteenth century. One must add that this is probably true only for skilled laborers, not for those who drilled tunnels in the quarries. After meticulous research, Baissel proved that in order to buy three hundred and sixty kilograms of wheat, a

worker had to work twelve days in the fourteenth century, twenty days in 1500, and twenty-two in 1882.

There is an even more convincing indicator: a comparison of the salary of a London builder who ate his meals at work, with that of a worker who dined at his own expense. The former received a third less than the latter. In the sixteenth century, one half less. Contemporary research on the working man's family budget demonstrates that considerably more than a third is spent on food.

Only a few records allow us to probe the relation between employer and employee. In the twelfth century a strike took place during the construction of an abbey in Obazin. The workers, unable to stand a prolonged fast, bought a hog and ate a portion, hiding the rest. Abbot Stedan discovered the meat and ordered that it be thrown away. Next day the workers refused to work, and even insulted the Abbot. In return, he warned them that he would find other laborers, better equipped to check their bodily desires and build God's house. It ended with the rebellious staff humbling themselves in front of the Abbot. In Siena there was a thirty-year lawsuit over wine from the vineyards belonging to the construction board, which the builders wanted to receive during their work. They substantiated their claim quite logically, saying that they did not want to interrupt their work in order to wet their lips. In the end the board acquiesced to these legitimate human demands.

ACCORDING TO MEDIEVAL TRADITION the cathedral builders descended from the builders of King Solomon's temple. An ancestry as noble as it is mystical. In contemporary novels about medieval architects, they are surrounded with an aura of mystery; half magicians, half alchemists, astronomers of cross-vaults, mysterious men, who came from far away carrying esoteric knowledge of perfect proportions and well-guarded secrets of construction. In reality the beginnings of this profession were extremely modest. An architect was lost amidst a crowd of anonymous craftsmen. In medieval texts the

very term “architect” is somewhat vague and equivocal, reflecting his ambiguous position and role. Most frequently he was a builder and mason, who did manual work just like the others. On occasion the role of architect was assumed by the patron himself, a bishop or an abbot, a learned man who had traveled widely, which was particularly important, as cathedrals were often copies of famous existing temples.

The role of an architect became more defined and his importance grew along with the Gothic cathedrals. His position was well-established by the middle of the thirteenth century. But just at this time we come across a text which makes our eyebrows rise in amazement. Nicolas de Biard, a moralist and preacher, speaks with indignation: “It has become a habit that one of the masters directs the works by word only, but scarcely ever lends a hand; despite this his pay is higher than that of the others.” And further on, he exclaims with contempt that an architect, wearing gloves and equipped with a rod, commands: “You should cut stone in such and such a manner,” yet he himself does not work. “Just like some prelates of today,” adds Nicolas de Biard, to make his condemnation complete.

The above text proves that the emancipation of the new profession was by no means easy. Architecture was not a university subject. Among the experienced masters there were amateurs who joined the trade, like the famous Perrault, who “from a bad doctor became a good architect,” or Wren[10], a mathematician and astronomer, or the playwright Vanbrugh[11]. But they were at least, as we would say today, intellectuals. According to Peach there were also simple men, like the illiterate village bricklayer who erected a large church with a dome on Malta. Monasteries, too, specialized in the trade. In the Middle Ages the Cistercians had a reputation as builders, which gave occasion to a quarrel between the Pope and Frederick II, who forced Cistercians to build his castles.

Architecture was denied a place among the liberal arts. No doubt this fact hurt the architects, who tried to compensate for the injustice by usurping academic titles, such as *magister cementariorum* or *magister lapidorum*. We know that the

practice provoked protests from the Paris palestra, who refused to lower themselves to the level of bricklayers. (Poor lawyers, what has remained of their causistry but a rich subject of comedy.)

But the supreme accolade was the inscription on the tomb of Pierre de Montreuil[12], architect of Saint-Louis, the creator of Sainte-Chapelle. He is called not only the flower of good conduct, but also *docteur ès pierres*—a title never used before or after. This is, however, the apogee of an individual career, which should not overshadow its modest beginnings.

What is an architect for us? One who makes plans. Were the plans of medieval cathedrals preserved? Only from the middle of the thirteenth century. The invaluable album of Villard de Honnecourt[13] dates from this time. I shall talk about it in a moment. Although a plan of the Abbey of Saint-Gall is preserved from the eleventh century and a plan of the water system for the Abbey of Canterbury from the twelfth century, these sketches can hardly be called plans due to their naive perspective, resembling children's drawings. The lack of primary sources for historians of architecture can easily be explained by the high cost of parchment. Perhaps plans were made on other, less durable materials? Or perhaps—the second blasphemy against the cathedral builders, after the lack of an estimated budget mentioned above—the outline of the construction was born rather vaguely in the minds of the initiators.

The firms dealing with the construction of cathedrals in Strasbourg, Cologne, Orvieto, Vienna, Florence, and Siena jealously guarded the blueprints which appeared in large numbers in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. This is the time of "tracing houses," *chambres aux traits*, small drafting workshops supervised by architects. Parchment became cheaper and tracing techniques improved substantially; but despite these documents, it is still difficult to reconstruct the building process based solely on their details. The general practice was to draw plans of elevations and facades, never a complete structure. Lacking accuracy and uniformity of scale, they were more like summaries than technical prints for

builders. The same can be said of the models made of wax or wood covered with plaster, held by saints or donors, which we see in numerous paintings. They were a means of communication between architect and patron, not between architect and worker.

Luckily there exists a document which provides a greater insight into the architect's workshop than all extant records and plans. It is the first and only known medieval textbook of architecture, a small encyclopedia of construction lore, a notebook of records and drawings, practical advice, and inventions.

We speak of the album of Villard de Honnecourt. Unfortunately, the thirty-three preserved sheets of parchment represent only half of the book. The entire section on wood construction and carpentry, which was of crucial importance to the cathedral builders is missing. Nevertheless the material contained in this architect's vade mecum overflows its pages.

Everything is there: mechanics, geometry and practical trigonometry, sketches of cathedrals, drawings of animals, people, ornaments and architectural details. Villard, who came from the small village of Honnecourt in Picardy, was a man of voracious curiosity. He traveled constantly and saw Gothic cathedrals in Meaux, Laon, Chartres, Reims; he ventured to Germany and Switzerland. He even reached Hungary and everywhere he drew and sketched things which attracted his attention: the outline of an organ loft, a grasshopper, a rosette, a lion, a human face emerging from the contour of a leaf, the descent from the Cross, nudes, figures in motion. Some drawings are schematic, written into an oblong or triangle as if Villard guided the heavy hand of a sculptor. Others, like a kneeling figure, surprise us with their decorative finesse and the perfection with which he renders drapery. He was also interested in recent inventions: a saw which could be used under water, a self-propelling wheel (the eternal dream of *perpetuum mobile*), and what Americans would call "gadgets"—how to construct an angel always pointing his finger towards the sun, how to make a statue of an eagle turn its head towards a priest reading the Gospel, or a clever mechanism for warming a bishop's hands during a long mass.

Novelists present medieval architects as a sect jealously guarding its secrets. If these secrets were truly important, they must have concerned pure science. If we accept this premise, architects in the Middle Ages would be the sole guardians of the properties of geometrical figures, the principles of material resistance, as well as the basic laws of mechanics. Here Villard's notebook is silent. It is a collection of practical recipes, the cookbook of a medieval architect.

The history of science maintains that the knowledge of mathematics in the Middle Ages was limited. We have the correspondence between two scholars from the middle of the eleventh century: Ragimbold of Cologne and Radolf of Liège. A stern contemporary scholar says that "analysis of these letters can be reduced to a revelation of ignorance." The learned men are unable to conduct a simple geometrical proof or to calculate the external angle in a triangle. Who knows how long we would have had to wait for a new Euclid if it were not for the Arabs, who introduced Aristotle, Plato, Euclid, and Ptolemy to Europe in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. No doubt this knowledge graced the hands of architects. Yet it is by no means certain what use was made of it.

Our nineteenth-century grandparents were incorrigible optimists when they spoke of the rationalism of Gothic architecture. One ought rather to believe those who claim that the knowledge of the cathedral builders was empirical, based on experiment and experience rather than calculation. Intuition invites error. Disasters during the construction of cathedrals were much more frequent than we might suppose, and did not stop at the famous accident in Beauvais or the ill-fated attempt to widen Siena's Duomo. A thorough investigation of Chartres' dome one hundred years after it was built presented a sobering state of affairs. The diagonal nave threatened to collapse, the portal had to be reinforced with iron bars. In the sixteenth century the condition of Notre-Dame de Paris was no less alarming. Why was this the case? Usually the foundations were not strong enough for the spiraling constructions. The vertical passion is well illustrated by the altitude of naves built in consecutive order: Sens—thirty meters; Paris—thirty-two

and a half; Chartres—about thirty-five meters; Bourges—thirty-seven meters; Reims—thirty-eight meters; Amiens—forty-two meters; and finally Beauvais—forty-eight meters.

The story of the construction of Milan Cathedral, which we know quite well from the records of a commission of experts, demonstrates something that should outrage rationalists. Let's imagine: the walls already constructed have reached a considerable height, yet the discussion is not about ornamental details but a quite fundamental matter—the layout of the cathedral. The French architect Jean Mignot[14] vehemently criticizes his Italian colleagues, and utters the classical aphorism: *"Ars sine scientia nihil est."* But this *scientia* belonged to the realm of empiricism, since none of the contending sides could produce a scholarly proof in defense of their own convictions.

We know that alchemy has more secrets than chemistry and that the branch of knowledge which to this day surpasses all others in its esoteric character is the culinary art. The essential secret of medieval architects was the skill of building according to plans, but their knowledge incorporated thousands of what we might call kitchen secrets: distinctions between various species of stone, production of various kinds of mortar. The obligation to guard these secrets bound not only architects, but also stonemasons, stone-layers, plasterers, and those who mixed limestone mortars and dwelt on the lowest levels of the hierarchy. Similar principles governed other professions that had nothing to do with architecture.

The real constitution of the cathedral builders consists of two manuscripts in English: one called "Regius," written about 1390; and the other named "Cook," written forty years later. Besides regulations governing religion, morals, and customs, they contain a separate point relating to discretion. They forbid the repetition of conversations held in lodges and other gatherings of stonemasons. For many years scholars thought that this interdiction concerned the repetition of esoteric formulae and secrets. It referred, however, as more recent research demonstrates, to specific technical and professional matters, like the manner of laying stones so that their position

closely resembled their original place inside the rock from which they had been hewn.

For a long time it was believed that medieval builders communicated by means of mysterious, secret signs. Recent research proves that this habit existed only in Scotland, connected with work in a special kind of stone the Scots imported. It was therefore an ordinance protecting highly skilled craftsmen against the less knowledgeable, and was closely bound to certain locations.

The dispute whether cathedrals were built *more geometrico* or "intuitively" like honeycombs, cannot be solved in general terms since the matter largely depended on the period, place, and the current knowledge, as well as on the education of a particular architect. Alexander Neckam[15], living at the end of the twelfth century, had the intuition of genius that the earth's gravitation is directed towards the center of the globe. But his practical deduction from this principle was rather frightening, and it was fortunate that architects didn't implement it. Neckam advised that walls should not be vertical, but should gradually fan outwards.

There is also the question of the module, an arbitrarily accepted measure whose product is repeated in different elements of the construction, like the length of the nave, the height of the columns, the proportion of the width of the transept to the main nave. There is no doubt that medieval architects used the module. An American archaeologist, Sumner Crosby, discovered that the module, quite consistently employed, for the Saint-Denis cathedral was 0.325 meters, which is approximately the length of the "Paris foot." Yet it was not a principle of construction but of aesthetics. It was widely understood that the use of simple rules of geometry gave the harmony of proportions.

At first an architect was one of the artisans. He was paid daily and worked as a mason, and up to the sixteenth century, quite surprisingly to us, received lower pay in Rouen than a stone-layer, although he was given an annual bonus. In time the material rewards of the profession became clearer, as the daily wage was paid whether or not the architect was present

at the site. To that we should add compensations in kind—clothes. In the beginning they were a sort of livery and stressed a relationship of servitude. But when we hear that in 1255 John Gloucester received a fur-lined coat, similar to those worn by the gentry, it is a clear sign of the ennoblement of the profession. The construction management, in order to bind the architect to his work, presented him with a horse, a house, and the high honor of dining at the abbot's table. In Italy, and even more in England, the material situation of an architect was much better than in France. In the fourteenth century his annual income in the British Isles amounted to eighteen pounds—when twenty pounds of income from property could buy a nobleman's title. In the thirteenth century the court architect of Charles d'Anjou enjoyed the title of proto-magister, a mounted retinue, and was counted amongst the knights.

The majority of Gothic cathedrals were the work of many architects. Nevertheless, attempts were made to entrust the supervision to one man for as long as possible. Life contracts were not unusual. They often included a clause which provided that in case of incurable illness, or the loss of sight, the architect would receive an agreed pension until the end of his days. In the late medieval period an architect often worked simultaneously on a number of constructions; but we also find a draconian contract between the management of the Bordeaux Cathedral and Jean Lebas, who held the title of "*maçon, maitre après Dieu des ouvrages des pierre*." He was allowed to leave the construction site just once a year in order to visit his family. The possibility of travel was greatly desired by architects, as consultations were not only a supplementary and quite lucrative source of income, but also added to the craftsmen's prominence.

WE SHOULD FINALLY DISPOSE of the myth of the cathedral builders' anonymity. Scores of their names have been preserved, not only in chronicles and financial registers.

The medieval constructors signed, if this is an appropriate term, their work with joy and pride.

In the cathedral of Chartres there is a design on the floor, which for a long time eluded the attention of scholars. It is a labyrinth shaped like a circle with a radius of eighteen meters, on which believers journeyed on their knees an abbreviated version of the pilgrimage to the Holy Land. In the central part of this labyrinth, which is a distant echo of Cretan civilization, there was a commemorative plaque. Unfortunately none of the originals is preserved, though we have a description and the content of two similar inscriptions. They are not, as one might expect, a verse from the Gospel or a fragment of liturgical text. The inscription in the cathedral of Amiens was quite surprising to those who held that medieval builders remained anonymous. It is the following:

"In the blessed year 1220 the construction of this church was begun. At that time the bishop was Évrart; the King of France was Louis, the son of Philip. The master of works was named Robert de Luzarches, and after him came Thomas de Cormont, and after him again his son Renaud, who placed the inscription in the year of Incarnation 1288."

The figures of three architects in the company of the bishop were carved in white marble. And it was not only craftsmen who passed on their names to posterity. The famous tympanum of Autun bears the inscription: "*Gislebertus fecit hoc opus*." We also find signatures on architectural details, like capitals and keystones. On the keystone of the vault in Rouen Cathedral we read the proud statement: "*Durandus me fecit.*" Clement of Chartres also signed his stained glass.

And finally, we come to signs on stone. The Middle Ages knew piecework, but this system was most frequently used during the construction of castles, especially when executed by workers recruited by force. The walls of Aigues-Mortes are evidence of this. Such features are rarely found on cathedral stones and probably were made by new workers, whose abilities were not yet known to the supervisors. Very important were the quarry signs, especially when the material came from diverse sources. The general practice was to erect walls of

identical or similar kinds of stone, which guaranteed endurance and allowed later corrections during reconstruction.

It is hard to imagine the precise orchestration of the crowds of sculptures populating the portals, eaves, and galleries of cathedrals without a strict definition of their position. Mistakes happened of course. The symbols of the months in Notre-Dame are placed in reverse order. The builders of Reims wanted to avoid a similar error. Their cathedral was besieged by an army of three thousand sculptures. Therefore they carefully marked the positions of the sculptures on the walls.

The true signatures of the craftsmen appeared relatively late. These were geometrical figures—triangles, polygons—occasionally pictures of tools like trowels, or letters of the alphabet. The signs were inherited; and if a father and son worked together, they added a small detail, for example, a dash to differentiate their stones. These signs, at first simple, gradually became more complex and inventive; and they were also used by the architects of the fifteenth century. Alexandre de Bernard placed a star-like pentagon at the end of his name. A modest sign carved on the stone, so that the builder was not deprived of his payment, became a signature and a symbol of professional pride.

THE HUNDRED YEARS' WAR was a lethal blow to the art of cathedral building. But the first symptoms of the crisis were visible earlier, at the end of the thirteenth century. A wave of persecution of free thought swept across the continent: Roger Bacon[16] died in prison in 1294; at the universities, liberty of speech was seriously curtailed. The centralizing power of the king, especially in France, snared city councils and subordinated them. The until then generous new bourgeoisie stopped contributing to the building of spires above which the dark clouds of war were gathering. The affair of the Templars is the symbolic end of an epoch.

Economic development slowed, population growth dropped, and inflation deepened. A charming song from 1313

informs us:

II se peut que le roy nous enchante[17],

Premier nous fit vingt de soixante,

Pouis de vingt, quatre, et dix de trente….

Or et argent tout est perdu,

Ne jamès n'en sera rendu.

The crash of the Italian bank of Scala, registered by almost the whole of Europe, coincided with the outbreak of the Hundred Years' War. Religious architecture was replaced by military architecture. The time of thick walls had returned.

The construction sites of unfinished cathedrals stand desolate. No one is interested any longer in high arches and intricate vaults.

The sons of those who sculpted an angel's smile roll cannon balls.

ALBIGENSIANS, INQUISITORS, AND TROUBADOURS

TRAVELING IN THE south of France, one again and again finds traces of the Albigensians. Inconspicuous traces—ruins, bones, a legend.

I witnessed a discussion during which learned professors were at each other's learned throats over the Albigensians. It is one of the most controversial questions in contemporary medieval studies. It may therefore be worthwhile to take a closer look at this heresy, eradicated in the middle of the thirteenth century. The event is directly connected to the ascendance of French power on the ruins of the duchy of Toulouse. The day when the stakes of Montségur[1] burned out was the day of the consolidation of the French empire. At the very heart of Christian Europe a flourishing civilization moving towards an important synthesis of oriental and occidental elements, was destroyed. The obliteration from the religious map of the world of the Albigensian faith—which might have played as significant a role in the shaping of the human race's spirituality as Buddhism or Islam—is connected with the founding of a centuries-long institution called the Inquisition. It is no wonder that this knot of political, national, and religious problems fans emotions and is so difficult to unravel.

Literature concerning the Albigensian question could fill a sizeable library. However, the original texts of the heretics can be counted on the fingers of one hand. A frequent occurrence in the history of culture. Not all works escape the sands and fires of history, so human thought and suffering have to be reconstructed from fragments, dubious records, and quotations in the writings of adversaries.

In order to understand the impact of the Albigensians, who flourished in the south of France between the eleventh and the twelfth centuries, one should recall, at least briefly, their remote ancestry. There is no doubt that in their heresy, or—as others claim—religion, the voice of the Orient can be heard. Historians searching for the origins of this movement traced the following genealogy: the Gnostics (some reach as far back as Zoroaster), the Manichaeans, the Paulicians, the Bogomils, the Cathars (who in southern France were called the Albigensians, after the city of Albi). The common characteristic of these groups was a sharp dualism, assuming the action of two forces in the universe, Good and Evil, and a belief that the material world was the work of the Devil (a rejection of the Old Testament), which led to an extreme condemnation of flesh and matter, and to strict asceticism in the moral sphere. The psychological background of these views was a fascination with evil, seen to be rampant in the world, a fascination easy to explain in an epoch of crises, violence, and wars.

The Gnostics have a bad reputation among many historians of philosophy, who would rather remove this chapter from their textbooks dedicated to the education of cool, analytical minds. Those who derive aesthetic satisfaction from intricate intellectual constructs, however, are always attracted to the theosophy of the Albigensians, their breathtaking ladder of hypostases connecting heaven and earth.

Christianity found a serious competitor in Mani, a figure equipped with exact dates of birth and death. He was born in Babylonia, although he was Persian in origin, and was brought up among the Gnostics. A prophet of great influence at the royal court, convinced of his messianic mission, he traveled to India and later taught crowds of disciples. He died in twenty-six days of agony, chained to a rock by the Persian King Bahram. Discoveries in Turfan and Fayoum (sites thousands of kilometers apart) prove that he, who claimed to be the follower of Buddha, Zarathustra, and Christ, tried to create a syncretic religion combining Buddhist, Mazdeic[2], and Christian elements. The popularity of Mani’s religion was

immense, spreading through China, Central Asia, North Africa, Italy, Spain, and Gaul.

The Manichaeans, through their wide influence, their Prophet's martyrdom, their stress on dualism even stronger than the Gnostics' (the cosmic battle of the powers of Good and Evil was projected into the human soul, tearing it into two parts), constituted the main opposition to Christianity. The Church Fathers did not spare their anathemas, and the more philosophical ones engaged in polemics, like St. Augustine (a renegade Manichaean) in his treatise *Contra Faustam*[3]. He pins his opponent to the wall trying to prove to him that the assumption of two principles of Good and Evil leads to polytheism. Faustus, however, parries the dialectical thrusts. "It is true that we assume two principles, but only one of them we call God, the other we call *hyle*, or matter, or as it is commonly called, Demon. If you claim that such practice is tantamount to worship of two gods, you must also say that a doctor, whose concern is health and illness, creates two notions of health." After the arguments spoke the sword, and Manichaeism was drowned in a sea of blood in the fourth century. Only in China did it survive until the thirteenth century and the invasion of Genghis Khan.

The story of the Paulicians, a dualist sect which created a state or rather half a sovereign colony in Armenia, on the border of Persia and Byzantium, is a fascinating episode in world history. The Catholic Bishop of Armenia accused them of worshipping the sun, a typically Manichaean feature; but the Paulicians always stressed their adherence to Christianity, probably for political reasons. Their small but stalwart army reached the Bosphorus, and was only defeated by Basil I[4] during the battle of Bartyrhax in 872. For his time, Basil's treatment of the defeated was humane; they were deported to the Balkans—a meaningful detail, as we shall see later.

It is questionable to what degree these heretical dynasties were conscious of belonging to the same tradition of religious thought. But here we reach a point at which their interrelationship becomes quite clear. In the tenth century the Bogomils appear in Bulgaria. They preach dualism with even

greater fervor than the Paulicians, claiming that the sensual world is the creation of Satan and that man—a mixture of water and earth—has a soul created by the breath of both Satan and God. The Bogomils oppose both Rome and Byzantium. They engage in intense proselytizing and reach the Apennine Peninsula, Tuscany, and Lombardy, as well as the south of France. Here they find particularly receptive ground, giving birth to the powerful Cathar heresy (after the Greek word meaning "pure"), who call themselves the Patarini in Bosnia and Dalmatia, and the Albigensians in France.

As we have noted, the sources are scarce. Let us enumerate the primary ones. First, *Interrogatio Johannis* (or "The Secret Supper of John the Evangelist"), an apocryphal document from the thirteenth century "falsifying," as an inquisitor adds, the Gospel of St. John. Its subject is a conversation between John and Christ in Heaven concerning such problems as the fall of Satan, his rule, the Creation, Christ's descent to earth, and the Last Judgment. This unusually beautiful text pre-dates the Latin writings of the Cathars, and clearly points to Bogomil origins. Two versions have been preserved: the so-called Carcassonne version, which can be found in an outstanding collection of documents called the Collection Doat, and the Vienna version.

The only extant theological work of the Cathars is the *Liber de duobus principiis* from the end of the thirteenth century. The text is far from a coherent scholastic discourse divided into chapters and paragraphs. It's most interesting. It contains a section on free will, which is the most interesting philosophically and important from a doctrinal point of view, as well as sections on cosmogony and polemics. The latter prove that Catharism was by no means a uniform movement, but was divided into schools and at least two factions: the moderate and the absolute dualists. The author of the treatise (scholars believe he was an Italian, Giovanni di Lugo[5]) represents the absolutist position, which claims that Evil is as eternal as Good, and that ontological being and nothingness—also understood as cosmic powers—always existed. One should stress, however, that polemics between the Cathars

were like family quarrels; opponents never reached for anathema as an ultimate weapon.

Finally *The Ritual of the Cathars*, a liturgical treatise which has reached us in two versions: the Lyon version in *langue d'oc* and the Florentine version in Latin. Historians of religion sometimes pay inadequate attention to the problems of rituals, yet it is in ritual, and not in theological concepts, that the degree of spiritualization of a religion finds its fullest expression. The Cathar liturgy is striking for its austerity and simplicity. They rejected most sacraments, for example marriage, as a consequence of their negative attitude toward matters of the flesh. But they accepted what today would be called civil marriage; hence the inquisitors' registers frequently record the word *amasia*, which means concubine, referring to a Cathar's wife. Confession was universal, and the most important sacrament was the *consolamentum*: a spiritual baptism granted only to adults after a long period of preparation, prayer, and fasting. The recipient left the numerous flock of "believers" to join the exclusive, unwavering elite of the "perfected."

The ritual was held in a private home. The white-washed walls were without ornament. There were some simple pieces of furniture and a table covered with a snow-white cloth, the Gospel and lighted candles. A candidate for perfection renounced the Catholic creed, promised not to eat meat or any animal products, not to kill, never to swear, and to avoid all carnal relations. He donated his property to the Cathar Church. From then on he devoted himself totally to apostolic work and charitable acts, especially tending to the sick, a paradox of sorts among people who treated the body with contempt. He also swore never to renounce his new creed, and history records only three names of the perfected who were daunted by the stake.

We look in vain for traces of magic, initiation rites, or gnosis in Cathar ritual. It referred rather, as Dondaine accurately observes, to the rites of earliest Christianity.

A summary of Cathar doctrine would require a complete system of subtle theological concepts, beyond the scope of this

essay, which will limit itself to recounting the basic theses.

Rene Nelli, a publisher, translator, and commentator on Cathar texts, claims that the basic difference between Catharism and Catholicism lay in the fact that for the Roman Church, evil was a punishment for sins and in a sense remained at God's disposal, while for the Cathars, God suffered from evil but did not inflict punishment through it. The sensual world was the work of Satan, the firstborn, fallen son of God. So was man, an alloy of being with nothingness. Hell did not exist; there were, however, reincarnations in which individuals would lose their carnality, ascending toward the light or sinking into evil matter. The Cathars rejected the Old Testament (the God of Moses was synonymous with the Devil) and considered the Gospels the only book worth reading and reflection. Yet to them Christ was not God incarnate, but an emanation of the Highest One. Because He was an incorporeal being, He could not suffer. The Cathars rejected the symbolism of the Cross as a brutal materialization of spiritual matters. They considered the Catholic Church a satanic institution, the "whore of Babylon." The end of the world would come in a cosmic conflagration: souls would return to God and matter would be destroyed. The consequence of this eschatology was the assumption that everyone would be saved after an appropriately long chain of incarnations—the only optimistic feature of this severe heresy.

Was it a heresy? In his book *Montségur*, Fernand Niel advances a daring yet plausible thesis: the Cathars were not heretics but founders of a new religion utterly divorced from Roman Catholicism. If we accept this argument, the Albigensian crusade appears in a different light, and the moral motives of the crusaders must be seriously called into question.

The author of this sketch is not a professional historian, but a storyteller. This frees him from the bond of scholarly objectivity, allows the play of prejudice and passion, from which even scholars are not entirely free. It is enough to compare two prominent works on the Albigensian crusade, one by Professor Pierre Belperron, the other by Zoe Oldenbourg: both rely on primary sources, but reach

completely opposite conclusions. Not only those who act in history, but also those who write about it, feel the presence of the black demon of intolerance behind their backs.

The fact that we speak of the conquered will provide a certain justification.

IN MARCH 1208, POPE Innocent III festively announced a crusade against Raymond VI, the Christian count of Toulouse —a cousin of the King of France, brother-in-law of the kings of England and Aragon, one of the greatest rulers in Europe. His vast realm, including Provence and stretching to the Pyrenees in the south, was powerful not only due to alliances and feudal relations. Its numerous, rich cities were heirs to the spirit of liberty and the old Mediterranean civilization. They were ruled by Roman Law, and their democratically elected governments—city councils and consuls—were the true rulers. The largest were autonomous republics with their own judiciaries, with many privileges long undreamt of even by the cities of the north. An atmosphere of freedom and equality reigned in the social life of these communities, without religious or racial prejudice. Arab doctors were held in high esteem, and Jews often participated in the city councils. Prominent schools of medicine, philosophy, astronomy, and mathematics functioned long before the foundation of universities, and not only in the capital—the "pink city" of Toulouse, the third city of Europe after Rome and Venice—but also in centers such as Narbonne, Avignon, Montpellier, Béziers. It was in Toulouse, not Paris, that Aristotle's philosophy, rediscovered by the Arabs, was first taught. The cast of mind in these regions resembles that of the Renaissance, whose beginnings were here, not in Italy. The language of the south of France—the *langue d'oc*—was the language of European poetry in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, until conquest reduced it to the rank of a dialect. Poets from Germany, England, France, Italy, and Catalonia arduously imitated the great lyrics of the troubadours. Even

Dante originally intended to write his *Divine Comedy* in *langue d'oc*.

If we can identify a single word which would be the key to a dead civilization, like *kalos kagathos* for the Greeks, and *virtus* for the Romans, such a word for the South would be *paratge*, found and declined innumerable times in the troubadours" poems, and meaning honor, integrity, equality, condemnation of brute force, and respect for individuals.

Thus one may say that in the south of what is now France there existed a separate civilization, and that the Albigensian crusade was a clash of two cultures. The defeat of the county of Toulouse is one of the catastrophes of humanity, like the destruction of the Cretan or Mayan civilizations.

The paradox of this civilization consisted in the co-existence of an epicurean lifestyle and passionate love poetry, with the veneration of the Cathars, who offended the Church with their excessive asceticism. To clarify this mystery, scholars suggest that the Lady in the poetry of the troubadours is the symbol of the Cathar Church. A risky thesis to say the least. Nevertheless, research has proved that some troubadours were influenced by the heresy (and by mystical Arab poetry), and that they understood love not as physical passion, but as a method of achieving spiritual and moral perfection.* Languedoc, with Lombardy and Bulgaria, was one of the European countries most affected by the Cathar heresy, whose followers came from all social strata, from peasants to princes. The roots of the popularity of the new religion can be traced to the corruption of the Catholic Church in southern France, to a specific intellectual and emotional situation, and simply to the attractiveness of Catharism. Around 1167 a meeting of Albigensians was held in St-Félix-de Caraman under the leadership of Nicestas, establishing the organization and ritual of the southern Cathar Church.

Naturally the Roman Church felt threatened by the spread of the heresy. One must admit that the first attempts to regain control were through peaceful, intellectual means: joint debates with the Cathars about dogma, numerous apostolic missions by prominent preachers such as St. Bernard of

Clairvaux, which ended in failure due to open hostility towards the Church. “The basilicas are without the faithful, the faithful without priests, priests without respect.”

The situation changed when the papal throne fell to thirty-eight-year-old Lotario Conti, who took the name of Innocent III. His face in a fresco in the church of Subiaco emanates peace and strength; but his spiritual rule in Languedoc was ill-judged, to put it mildly, partly because of the inertia of the local clergy, partly because of the officious papal legates. Though morally responsible for the Albigensian crusade, the new Pope was by no means a religious fanatic; his letters are full of a concern with justice and—even taking into account official style—moderate in tone.

The same cannot be said of his special envoy—a Cistercian monk, Pierre de Castelnau[6] of the Abbey of Fontfroide, who went to Languedoc charged with suppressing the heresy. He seems to have been a fanatic lacking any political sense, diplomatic talent, and the simplest tact. Nominated as the pope’s envoy with special powers, he was given as his assistant Arnaud Amaury[7], Abbot of Citeaux. Their actions produced a chain of misunderstandings and embitterment. Of equally little effect were the fiery sermons of St. Dominic, who got laughter and mockery instead of the crown of martyrdom (“I beg you not to kill me instantly, but to tear my limbs out one by one”). The continuous debates, being a clash of different worlds, traditions, and mentalities, had negligible results. Defenders of the Catholic faith sometimes lost patience, as exemplified by St. Bernard of Verfeil[8]—“Let God curse you, thick-skinned heretics, among whom I sought in vain even a little subtle intelligence”—or Brother Étienne de Minia, who tried to exclude from philosophical disputes the sister of the Duke of Foix, Esclarmonde[9]: “Go attend to your spinning-wheel, Lady; it does not become you to have a voice in these matters.”

Finally Pierre de Castelnau reached the conclusion that only force could suppress the heresy. Unable to arrange a coalition of Provençal lords who would move against the heretics under the leadership of Raymond VI, he threw a curse

on the Count of Toulouse. “He who would disinherit you will be in the right, and he who would kill you will be blessed.” Such was the conclusion of the mission of the papal emissary who, having nothing more to do, set off back to Rome.

He was murdered by an unknown assassin in Saint-Gilles, at dawn on January 15, 1208. Raymond’s men became the main suspects. The martyr’s blood-stained shirt was carried from castle to castle and town to town in northern France, and the faithful were summoned to a crusade. Raymond VI, seeing the imminent danger, decided to submit to the pope’s will. In June 1209, accompanied by three archbishops, nineteen bishops, dignitaries, vassals, clergy, and laymen, with a bare chest, a rope around his neck, and a candle in his hands, flogged with birch twigs, he walked to the stone lions guarding the portal of the beautiful cathedral in Saint-Gilles. The treaty signed after this ceremony in essence subjected the Duchy to a true dictatorship of the Church. Moreover, Raymond surprised everyone by taking the Cross and joining the army of crusaders then sailing down the Rhône Valley.

The mighty train of men, horses, and iron stretching for kilometers is terrifying to behold. Among the army are Flemish, Normans, Burgundians, Frenchmen, and Germans. They are led by bishops, archbishops, Duke Odo of Burgundy, the dukes of Nevers, Boulogne, and Saint-Pol, renowned barons and knights like Simon de Montfort[10] and Guy de Levis[11]. The rest of the force is composed of sergeants, foot-soldiers, and mercenaries—the terrible, ruthless force known to every medieval army, recruited among cutthroats hungry for blood and loot. The most highly-priced hirelings come from the Basque, Aragonese, and Brabant regions. They are lowly in the military hierarchy, but often a decisive factor in battle. If we add auxiliary units and crowds of pilgrims lured by the hope of pious contemplation of burning stakes, the figure of three hundred thousand provided by chronicles does not seem exaggerated, assuming that the army of knights was but a small fraction of this mass, like the percentage of tanks to infantry in a modern army.

The first of the nobles to meet the crusaders' swords is the Viscount of Carcassonne, Béziers, and Albi, twenty-five-year-old Raymond-Roger from the Trencavel family. Frightened by the advance of the enemy army, he attempts to negotiate with the pope's legate. In vain. The heavy war machine, "an army never seen before," cannot be stopped once put in motion. Raymond-Roger barricades himself in Carcassonne, while the crusaders follow the old Roman road towards Béziers.

The town is situated on a hill over the river Orb. It has solid walls and sufficient food. The Bishop of Béziers tries to negotiate, but the crusaders present a list of two hundred and twenty persons (or families) accused of heresy, and demand their surrender. The town councilors answer with dignity that they would rather be "drowned in the salty sea" than deliver their citizens. The siege begins. On Saint Magdalen day, July 22, before military action commences, matters take a fatal turn for the defenders. A group of burghers, encouraged by the passivity of the huge army, leaves the city walls with "great white banners, and runs forward until out of breath, hoping to frighten the enemy away, like a flock of sparrows from a stand of oats." "Immense imprudence," because the army of mercenaries immediately leaps to its feet.

They are barefooted, armed with clubs and knives, dressed only in shirts and trousers, but their thirst for blood is inexhaustible. They manage to break into the town following the members of the rash expedition. Once inside, they spread indescribable terror; the assault on the walls takes only a few hours. A crowd of survivors gathers in Saint Nazaire Cathedral, and in the churches of Saint Magdalen and Saint Jude. The soldiery break down the doors and slaughter everyone: the new-born, women, cripples, elders, and priests celebrating mass. Bells toll for the dead. The annihilation is total.

Pierre de Vaux-de-Cernay, a Cistercian monk and chronicler of the expedition against the Albigensians, wrote that in St. Magdalen alone seven thousand people were killed, which is probably an exaggeration. Historians estimate, however, that some thirty thousand (innocent) people were killed in Béziers. What makes this figure even more terrifying

is that inhabitants were put to the sword without discrimination. The papal legate, Arnaud Amaury, when asked during the battle what was to be done with the Catholics who must have been among those massacred, said: “Kill everyone. God will recognize his own.” This famous response is probably apocryphal, since it is quoted by a fourteenth-century chronicler, Caesarius of Heisterbach. It is likely that Arnaud Amaury—a blockhead rather than a cynic—uttered only the first sentence. Nevertheless, this dictum provides an excellent commentary on the events.

As a result of the quarrel between the mercenaries and the regular army over the division of spoils, the town was set on fire “together with the cathedral built by Master Gervaise[12], which split in half with a great noise in the heat of the flames, and fell into two parts.” With flying banners the crusaders turned towards the walls of Carcassonne, a city of thirty spires sheltering Viscount Raymond-Roger.

The Carcassonne of today, reconstructed by Viollet-le-Duc[13], gives only a faint notion of the fortress that it was, surrounded by a double wall. The first feature which strikes a visitor is the small space between the walls, about ten thousand square meters. In August 1209 the city offered asylum to tens of thousands of people, not counting cattle and horses. Despite that fact, the battle was fierce, and the young Raymond-Roger conducted it with the talent and bravura of an experienced commander. The hot summer became an ally of the crusaders. A dark cloud of flies and the odor of pestilence hung over Carcassonne. Lack of water forced the defenders to capitulate after a fortnight’s siege.

The events that followed provoke controversies among scholars, and the reports of Guillaume de Tudèle[14] and Guillaume de Puylaurens[15] are full of insinuations, but do not cast enough light on this vastly important episode. No agreement is signed between the crusaders and Raymond-Roger, and worse still, in a violation of the knightly code of honor, the Viscount is imprisoned and dies soon after of dysentery. The pope’s envoy presses for the election of his successor from among the senior French crusaders, in flagrant

violation of feudal law, especially as Raymond-Roger's four-year-old son is alive. Magnanimously, the French lords and counts refuse the title and inheritance after his tragic death. "There was no one who would not feel it was a loss of honor to accept the land," says Guillaume de Tudèle.

Then enters a man whose figure would cast an ominous shadow on Provence and Languedoc for many years: Simon de Montfort. He has long been remembered as the symbol of a warrior who, accompanied by a handful of loyal men, could shake the foundations of an empire. He was a prototypical conquistador—a fanatic, whose horizons were limited by his military helmet, a man with a strong arm, ambitious, energetic, exceedingly talented as a commander: a perfect candidate to be Viscount of Carcassonne and Béziers. In addition, he had distinguished himself in the Fourth Crusade and was a direct vassal of the King of France.

The fall of Carcassonne opened the gates of many castles for Montfort, but the forty days for which the crusaders were pledged to fight the heretics came to an end, and the warriors departed to the north. Simon de Montfort remained, with a contingent of about twenty-six knights. Of course during the eight years of constant struggle "the lion of the crusades" received reinforcements. The country was terrorized, but by no means conquered.

In June 1210, Montfort besieged Minerve, a city situated between Carcassonne and Béziers among deep gorges and a deserted countryside. The fortress was defended bravely, but a siege-machine destroyed the castle's water supply system, and the defenders were forced to negotiate. According to accepted practice, heretics who renounced their faith would be spared. One of Montfort's captains, Robert de Mauvoisin, protested. He had come to destroy heresy, not to show indulgence. Arnaud Amaury consoled him: "Rest assured, sir, few will be converted." He was right. The first great pyre in the conquered city consumed one hundred and fifty men and women, who "died with courage worthy of a better cause," as the Benedictine Dom Vaissete[16] commented sadly.

The war had long ceased to be an expedition against heretics, and had become a great battle between the North and the South, a war of nations; however many castles Montfort captured, the country was not conquered. Noblemen waited in their eagles' nests for the right moment, towns rebelled, and French garrisons placed in captured fortresses were often wiped out. Sieges grew longer and harder. Béziers fell in a few hours; it took fifteen days to conquer Carcassonne, and Minerve only surrendered after six weeks.

The fortress of Termes was besieged by the crusaders for four months. The castle's position was perfect. In order to approach it, one had to "jump into a precipice, then, so to speak, crawl towards the sky." The army besieging Termes was demoralized, reduced to half its original size, and starved. After three difficult months of siege the bishops accompanying Montfort are ready to abandon him. The "lion of the crusades" begs them to stay two more days. On the evening of the next day, the commander of the fortress declared his willingness to negotiate. The cisterns in the town had dried up; once again water proved the crusaders' ally. But at night there was a downpour, and Raymond, the leader of the garrison, shut himself up in the fortress. The ensuing battle was fierce and rich in dramatic episodes. Montfort's chaplain was killed during mass, and his closest companion, with whom he used to walk arm-in-arm, was beheaded by a stone-throwing machine. Montfort was broken. He contemplated ending the siege and entering a monastery. One day the fortress fell silent, and the crusaders discovered to their amazement that it was empty. This time rats defeated the besieged: during the dry weather they got into the cisterns and poisoned the water.

The war draws closer to the countries of Toulouse and Foix. According to a methodical plan of conquest, the crusaders besiege Lavaur. It is defended by Aimery de Montréal, a former ally of Montfort and a son of Blanche de Laurac, a famous "perfected one." The lady is also known for her loyalty to the Cathar Church and her charitable works. The walls of Lavaur fall after a heroic defense lasting over two months. The commander and eighty knights are hanged. A

hastily-built scaffold collapses under their weight, and henchmen have to finish off victims by cutting their throats. The Countess is thrown into a well and stoned. A gigantic stake, the largest of the war, devours four hundred Albigensians, who step into the flames singing *"cum ingenio gaudio."*

The inevitable confrontation with the Count of Toulouse draws nearer, since the crusaders have no doubt that Raymond is an unreliable ally. The latter does everything to save his lands from war, but the resistance of the pope's legate cannot be broken. Montfort besieges the heart of the country, the capital of Languedoc, Toulouse; but suddenly he himself is surrounded at Castelnaudary. A bloody yet indecisive battle is fought under the town walls.

Montfort's ambitions disturb the Pope, who even temporarily suspends the crusade and grants the title of Duke of Narbonne to his envoy, Arnaud Amaury—thus starting a lasting feud between two men who had so far worked hand-in-hand.

At this point the King of Aragon enters the war game: Pedro II, connected by feudal ties with Languedoc, the brother-in-law of the Duke of Toulouse and former leader of the crusade against the Spanish Moslems, the conqueror of Las Navas de Tolosa[17]. For some time, though to little avail, he had tried to play the role of mediator between his neighbors and the French; now, relying on his military glory, he attempts to explain to the Pope that a war against heretics has turned into a barbarian conquest and colonization of a Christian country.

When his arguments yield no result, Pedro II in September 1213 crosses the Pyrenees with the finest knights of Aragon and Catalonia and joins Raymond VI. The proportion of knights is 900 to 2000, to Montfort's disadvantage, when both armies prepare for battle near the town of Muret. In a council of war, Raymond proposes to wait for an attack, then launch a counter-attack and push the enemy back to the castle, where it would soon have to capitulate. This sane plan seems insufficiently picturesque and knightly to the Spaniards.

Meanwhile Montfort falls upon the Aragonese with Napoleonic speed and bravura, and the armies come together in a deadly embrace. “It sounded as though a huge forest were falling under ax-blows.” Pedro II, a thirty-nine-year-old warrior with the strength of a tiger, does not command the fight, but is at the center of the chaos which constituted a medieval battle. After a bitter fight he is killed; news of their king’s death spreads panic among the army. A sudden attack by Montfort from the flank disperses his enemies, among them the Count of Toulouse’s army, which did not even have the chance to enter the battle. The infantry of Languedoc, already storming the walls of Muret, is decimated; up to twenty thousand men disappear in the quick current of the Garonne. A year and a half later, without losing a single soldier, Montfort enters Toulouse, the Rome of the Cathars. Raymond VI and his son seek asylum at the court of the King of England.

Montfort becomes the lord of a country larger than the domain of the King of France. The fate of Languedoc seems to be sealed, but in effect the leader has only as much land as French soldiers are able to defend.

On July 16, 1216, Pope Innocent III dies, and nineteen-year-old Raymond VII lands in Marseille, enthusiastically welcomed by the population. He immediately besieges Beaucaire and forces Simon de Montfort’s brother to surrender. The inhabitants of Toulouse build barricades and drive out the French. Raymond VI, marching through the Pyrenees with an Aragonese army, enters his capital, welcomed with tears of joy. Defeated for the first time, Montfort besieges the city in vain, despite reinforcements. The humiliated “lion of the crusades” is a different man now, and a cardinal-legate, Bertrand, complains that the great warrior is stricken with a sudden inertia, “asking God only to give him peace and to relieve him by death from so many sufferings.” In the ninth month of the siege, during a morning raid by the Toulousians, Simon’s brother Guy de Montfort is wounded. As the commander runs from a tent where he has been hearing mass, a huge stone from a catapult strikes the Duke’s steel helmet, “so mighty a blow it crushed his eyes, his brain, his

teeth, his brow and his jaws. And he fell to the ground, dead, bloodied, and black."

Montfort[18]

es mort

es mort

es mort

viva Toloza

ciotat gloriosa

et poderosa

tornan lo paratge et l'onor!

This cry of joy could be heard from the Alps to the Ocean.

Simon's son Amaury is but a shadow of his talented father. Twice defeated, he delivers the conquered lands to the King of France. The old order returns to Languedoc. On January 15, 1224, Amaury de Montfort leaves Carcassonne forever, with his father's huge body sewn into a bull's hide.

After this first act of the drama came the expedition of Louis VIII, the work of his ambitious wife, Blanche de Castile, who tried by any means to prevent an agreement between Raymond VI and the Pope. Despite the heroic defense of Avignon, the new war was a military walk-over; but the crusaders' army was tormented by plague, and King Louis VIII died on his way back. A new royal governor-general in Carcassonne, Humbert de Beaujeu, energetically continued the work of Montfort, reclaiming the lost castles and introducing a new weapon against the recalcitrant country. "In the morning, after hearing mass and eating breakfast," says the historian Guillaume de Puylaurens, "the crusaders set off preceded by archers…and started to destroy the vineyards situated closest to the city, while its inhabitants slept; later they retreated to the nearby fields, destroying everything as they went." The environs of unconquered Toulouse and other cities were turned into a desert. The war of castles continued.

In his *History of the Albigensians*, Napoleon Peyrat estimates the losses of the South during the fifteen years of war to be one million dead. Other scholars consider this figure excessive, yet all admit a tremendous loss of blood. The chronicles, as always, describe the deaths of knights and heroes, but true to Homeric tradition they are indifferent to the mounds of anonymous victims.

Only deadly exhaustion and the prospect of his country's complete ruin can explain why Raymond VII, the conqueror of Montfort, who defied the King of France, signed a treaty in Meaux in 1229, agreeing to conditions of the kind usually imposed on a thoroughly defeated enemy. The sovereign of Languedoc pledged not only loyalty to the Church and the King of France, but also committed himself to fighting against the heresy. Especially drastic was the obligation to pay two silver marks to anyone denouncing a heretic. It was also declared that the fortifications of Toulouse and thirty other castles would be demolished, and the majority of fortresses handed over to the King of France. New borders were drawn; of the old territory only a third remained. Raymond VII gave his daughter in marriage to the brother of Louis IX, Alphonse de Poitiers, and since the Count of Toulouse had no son, this move sealed the fate of Languedoc.

The ceremonial signing of the treaty was held in the newly-built cathedral of Notre-Dame on Maundy Thursday 1229. With their victory over the German Emperor at Bouvines, the Capetians started to believe in their mission. The ceremony was clearly aimed at humiliating Montfort's conqueror, and took place in the presence of the young King Louis IX, the Queen, prelates, and the citizens of Paris. Raymond VII, dressed only in a shirt and with a rope round his neck, was led by the legates of Poland and England to the altar, where a cardinal-legate awaited him with a rod. "It was a pity to see this great Duke," writes Guillaume de Puylaurens, "who had resisted the power of so many nations for so long, being led barefoot, in a simple shirt and trousers, to the steps of the altar." Tradition holds that kneeling in front of the prelate, the Duke burst into mad laughter. Perhaps he thought then of how his father had been scourged and brought to the altar at Saint-

Gilles twenty years before. When he returned to Toulouse, the commissars of the Church and the King were already at work, governing the land that he had never lost in battle. Troubadour Sicard de Marvejols[19] wails:

Ai Toloza et Provensa

e la terra d'Argensa

Bezers et Carcassey

Quo vos vi quo vos vei.

THE NEW PAPAL LEGATE, Cardinal Romanus of St. Angelo, a councilor and one of the instigators of the Treaty of Meaux, convened a synod in Toulouse to outline the methods of battle against the Albigensians. Forty-five articles for tracking down, examining, and punishing heretics were established. Thus the Inquisition was born, which proved to be a more effective weapon than the crusaders' swords; its development and influence on future institutions vastly exceeded the events described in this essay.

The "Capitula" established by the synod in Toulouse are worth quoting, at least in part:

"In each parish bishops will appoint one priest and three laymen of impeccable reputation—more, if necessary—who will swear to search for heretics in their parish with perseverance and faith. They will meticulously search all suspicious houses, rooms and cellars, and even the most secret corners. Upon finding heretics, or people giving them support, shelter or aid, they should take appropriate measures to prevent their escape, and also notify the bishop, the lord or his representative as soon as possible.

"The lords should search carefully for the heretics in towns, houses and forests where they meet and destroy their shelters.

"Whosoever lets a heretic remain on his land—for money or for any other reason—will lose his land in perpetuity, and will be punished by the lord according to the level of his guilt.

"Also he on whose land heretics frequently meet will be punished, even if it were without his knowledge, but through his neglect.

"A house in which a heretic is found will be destroyed, and the land confiscated.

"A lord's deputy who does not search the places suspected of being heretical meeting-places with sufficient zeal, will lose his position without redress.

"Everybody has the right to search for heretics on his neighbor's land…Also the King can chase them on the land of the Duke of Toulouse, and vice versa.

"*Hereticus vestitus*, he who renounces his heresy spontaneously, may not remain in the place of habitation if the area is considered to be tainted by heresy. He will be moved to a town known to be Catholic. The converted will wear two crosses on their clothes—one on the right, one on the left side—of a different color from their clothes. They will not be able to hold public office, or perform legal acts until their rehabilitation is confirmed by the Pope or his legate, after an appropriate punishment.

"A heretic who seeks to return to the Catholic community not out of conviction, but out of fear of death or any other reason, will be placed in prison by the bishop to serve his sentence there (with all precautions against his spreading his heresy to others).

"All adult Catholics will take an oath in front of their bishop to preserve their creed, and to track down heretics with all the means at their disposal. This oath is to be renewed every two years.

"He who is suspected of heresy cannot be a doctor. If a sick person receives the Holy Communion from his vicar, he should be watched carefully, so that no heretic or person

suspected of heresy gains access to him, as such visits have unfortunate consequences."

At first the Inquisition was the domain of bishops and local clergy, but the clergy proved too slow in putting the cruel machinery into motion. In 1233 Pope Gregory IX gave the Dominicans inquisitorial powers. From that time onward they were responsible only to the Pope; their sentences could be quashed only by him, which was a change of fundamental significance making the Inquisition an autonomous force with immense prerogatives.

The legal acts that followed made the synod's decisions in Toulouse even stricter. Among other things the articles of the synod of Arles, for example, provide for the bodies of dead heretics to be exhumed and burned at the stake. A wave of false conversions forces the inquisitors to use increasingly severe preventive measures. Prisons are built to house for life all those who simulate conversion. In 1243 a meeting convened in Narbonne rules that no one can be released from prison because of family obligations, age, or poor health. The ruling to keep the names of prosecution witnesses secret from the accused is an obvious violation of Roman Law. The testimony of criminals, the infamous, and criminal conspirators is approved in cases of heresy. Even the testimony of persons openly hostile to a defendant, or whose only motive is vindictive, is not over-ruled as evidence.

History preserves the names of the first two inquisitors: brother Pierre Seila, son of a rich burgher of Toulouse and one of the first Dominicans, and Guillaume Arnaud, from Montpellier. Both were determined to dispatch their duties with great energy; soon after their nomination they imprisoned and executed Vigoros de la Bacone, the alleged leader of the heretics in Toulouse. Guillaume Arnaud traveled the provinces carrying out measures that terrified the people and alarmed the count. Raymond complained to the Pope about the inquisitors' lawless procedures: examining witnesses behind closed doors, refusing defendants legal assistance, putting the dead on trial, and spreading such fear that terrified citizens denounced the innocent. "They upset the country, and because of their abuses the population is turning against the monasteries and clergy."

It may be thought that the inquisitors commanded great resources. In fact the two Dominicans had neither means nor people of their own, and had to depend entirely on the assistance of the clergy and lay authorities. Only later did they receive permission for armed guards, tribunal assistants, notaries, and assessors, though the number of personnel could not exceed eighty to each inquisitor. Thus the development of the institution can be explained only by immense energy, a sense of mission, and the temptation of martyrdom.

Among the many works of art devoted to the struggle of the Dominicans against heresy, one of the most striking is the fresco by Andrea da Firenze[20] in the Spanish Chapel in Santa Maria Novella in Florence. Preaching brothers convert the heretics, who in shame tear up their godless books. But this is a euphemistic version of history. The truth is depicted at the bottom of the painting, disguised in animal symbolism: dogs (*Domini canes*) tearing up wolves (heretics).

The general state of mind at that time is well illustrated by the affair of Jean Textor. He lived on the outskirts of Toulouse, and was most probably a Catholic. He went around the town streets, addressing people in words that betray his terror: “Gentlemen, listen to me! I am not a heretic, for I have a wife and I sleep with her, I have sons, I eat meat, and I lie and swear at times, and I am a faithful Christian. So don’t let them say these things about me, for I truly believe in God. They can accuse you as well as me, for these wicked men want to ruin honest men and to steal the town of our Lord.” Despite the indignation of the people of Toulouse, Textor was imprisoned and quickly burned at the stake.

The number of suspects was so great that Arnaud and Seila were not able to examine all those they had arrested. Those sentenced to carrying a cross, to a fine, or a go on a pilgrimage, lived in uncertainty, because the only definitive sentence is that of death. But even the dead could not rest in peace. Cemeteries were full of open graves from which bodies were exhumed to be purified by fire. The cruelty of the Dominicans was so extreme that it evoked the indignation of other orders. The monks of Belleperche gave shelter to

heretics in their monastery, which was certainly not an isolated case.

In his *Chronicon*[21], Guillaume Pelhisson tells a story which would seem the tale of a madman full of sound and fury, were it not that the chronicler was an eyewitness, and as the inquisitors' assistant cannot be suspected of denigrating his masters. On August 4, 1234, after celebrating mass, Raymond de Miramont, the Bishop of Toulouse, was informed that in a nearby home a dying old woman had received the *consolamentum*. The Bishop, accompanied by priests, went to the home of the expiring lady who, unaware of the situation and convinced that her visitor was a Cathar bishop, proclaimed her beliefs. Called to convert to Catholicism, she refused, upon which she was transported on her bed to a hastily built stake and burned. Having fulfilled their task, the Bishop and his train returned to the refectory, "where, giving thanks to God and the Blessed Dominic, they ate with rejoicing what had been prepared for them."

Such practices provoked riots in the city, which reached their height when the inquisitors indicted two city councilors accused of supporting heretics; in fact the lay authorities did all they could to save sentenced citizens, or to allow their escape. As the result of an open confrontation, the Dominicans were expelled and Bishop Raymond left Toulouse. But after an exchange of vehement letters between the Duke and the Pope, they returned, and it started all over again. One of the "perfected," a convert to Catholicism, denounced a number of important people, which resulted in a series of posthumous trials. Cemeteries were ploughed up, and mortal remains were nailed to fences amidst cries of "*Qui atal fara, atal pendra*[22]."

In 1233 the first inquisitor to be martyred fell under the assault of a mob in Cordes; from then on, acts of resistance multiplied. In addition, fights between groups of Catholics and heretics broke out in once peaceful towns.

It would be unfair to claim that all those caught in the brothers' net went to the stake. Documents record that a considerable number were pardoned. In 1241 during one week, two hundred and forty-one people received canonical

absolution. The protocols of interrogations, however, formed the basis of very detailed files, and of the terrifying view that "they know everything." History—not only in the Middle Ages—teaches that a nation subjected to police measures is demoralized, crumbles from within and loses its ability to resist. Even the most ruthless hand-to-hand combat is less disastrous than whispers, surveillance, fear of one's neighbor, and a scent of betrayal in the air.

It is worth comparing the criminal procedure of the period with the procedure of the Inquisition. The Code of Justinian, on which criminal law was based, gave the defendant several rights, burdened the prosecution with the task of collecting proof, excluded witnesses whose impartiality was doubtful, and also required that the denouncer confront the accused. In a country which had lived through twenty years of war and persecutions, people learned to change their skin according to circumstances, and it was not easy to track down heretics by legal methods. To carry out their persecution more effectively, the range of acceptable witnesses had to be broadened. A defense attorney was theoretically admissible, but whoever took upon himself the task of defending a heretic automatically became a suspect, so his aid had little effect. A novelty in relation to normal court procedure, was the examining of witnesses behind closed doors, which became the basis for the Inquisition's success, as it managed to break the solidarity of even the most tightly-knit groups.

Preceded by the gossip of a hundred tongues, a sizeable train of people would enter a city: men with pens—notaries, secretaries, scribes; and men with iron—soldiers, servants, prison guards, who gathered round an inquisitor. The newcomers established themselves in the bishop's palace or in a monastery and would proclaim a "time of mercy," usually lasting one week. Those who reported of their own free will could not be punished by death, prison, or loss of property. But in return they had to provide information, from which the net of suspicion was woven.

People coming to the inquisitors at this stage usually accused themselves of petty or imaginary crimes, like the miller in Belcaire who confessed that he had doubted the help

of St. Martin during the construction of his mill. But such a babbler, in a sweat-drenched shirt, would usually know much more, and for example could tell who had greeted one of the "perfected" in the street twenty years ago. The names of the informers were kept secret; two anonymous testimonies sufficed to begin an investigation. An inquisitor combined powers usually separated in a normal trial: he was investigating magistrate, prosecutor, and sentencing judge. Even other representatives of the clergy participating in trials had no voice. The conscience of one person decided as to guilt or innocence.

The suspect received a summons to appear in front of the inquisitorial tribunal. During the examination he did not know the nature of his indictment, which was of great advantage to the tribunal: the accused often confessed more than was expected. After cross-examination, he was placed in prison or released under "guarded freedom." Prisons—a type of architecture that developed enormously at this period—were grim, as we can see in the jails of Carcassonne and Toulouse: dark, abysmal pits in which one could neither lie nor stand upright. Hunger, thirst, and irons broke even the strongest.

If the suspect proved to be unexpectedly tough, torture was used. This form of obtaining testimonies was widely practiced in lay jurisdiction in connection with serious crimes; it had been rather avoided by canonical courts. As a principle it was assumed in any case that torture should cause neither permanent injury or bloodshed. The system of flogging had long been in use, and it was practiced with skill and knowledge of human pain—there were respected experts in this field. Pope Innocent IV's bull of May 15, 1252, finally legalized torture.

The defendant's confession was a formality, since the testimony of two informers was sufficient ground for sentencing. Informers had by no means an easy life. The denunciator of seven of the "perfected" was slaughtered in his own bed, and for a similar deed, a sergeant Doumenage was hanged from a dead branch. Informers preferred to give names of the dead, or of those who could hide in inaccessible castles, like Montségur or Queribus[23].

Admittedly the stake was reserved for the "perfected," or for stubborn adherents of the Cathar Church. The rest received canonical sentences, which did have a serious impact on their lives. Carrying the cross, assigned to those who made their confessions spontaneously, resulted in the boycott of the converts in societies where heresy was dominant, and bred accusations of spying for the Inquisition. Pilgrimage to remote localities was used as a penance which was a severe financial burden for the entire family; it could last from a couple of months to five years, as was the case with knights sent to the Holy Land or to Constantinople. Such punishment could befall a person who exchanged a few words with a heretic during a sea journey, or as an eleven-year-old greeted at his parents' behest one of the "perfected" in the street.

Whoever thinks that the protocols of the Inquisition contain shocking material, suitable for literary treatment, is mistaken. The dialogues—as we discover by reading the "Collection Doat"—do not consist of violent responses, passion, threats, resistance, and breakdowns, but a terrible monotony. The real terror is to be found in the inventories of torture chambers.

What can be found in the protocols? Names, dates, places, and little else. "During *consolamentum* administered to Auger Isorn in Fanjeaux were present: Bec from Fanjeaux, Guillaume from La Ilhe, Gaillard from Feste, Arnaud from Ovo, Jourdain from Roquefort…" "Atho Arnaud from Castelverdun demanded *consolamentum* in the house of his relatives named Covars, from Mongradail…" "Deacons Bernard Coldefi and Arnaud Guiraud lived permanently in Montréal, and their meetings were attended by Raymond from Sanchos, Peteria, wife of a Moor from Montréal…," and so on, page after page.

Bernard Gui, an inquisitor of the next century, the fourteenth, is the author of an instructive work: *Libellis de ordine praedicatorum*, a handbook for inquisitors, which gives us some idea of the nature of the interrogations of Albigensians.

"…The suspect is asked whether he saw or met one or many heretics; where it was, how many times, and when…

“item: whether he had any relations with them; where, when, and who recommended him;

“item: whether he received in his dwelling one or many heretics, who in particular, and who brought them; how long they stayed with him, where they went, who visited them, whether he heard their preaching, and what it concerned;

“item: whether he revered heretics, or knew of anyone else revering them;

“item: whether he ate consecrated bread with them, and how this bread was consecrated…

“item: whether he greeted heretics, or saw other people greeting them…

“item: whether he believed that a person adhering to the heretic creed can be saved…

Other questions concerned the views and the past of people with whom the suspect had any contact.

This means of inquiry is only apparently narrow, dull, and aimless. In fact its cool, impersonal logic allowed the examiner to pursue his goal without engaging in a psychological game, trying to penetrate motives and circumstances; it paralyzed the suspect with the fear we always experience when instead of a living person, we encounter stern necessity. The two orders—the moral and psychological, and that of facts—are perfectly separated.

THE POETRY OF THE troubadours came under violent attack, as though it were not enough that courts and patrons should be in the hands of northern soldiers. “The world has changed so much that it is impossible to recognize it,” laments Bertran d’Alamanon[24]. Bishops and Dominicans call for the rejection of “songs full of vanity,” and the papal legate hears oaths of knights nevermore to write verse. Lyrical poetry—a phenomenon known from other historical epochs—is replaced by weighty ideological diatribes, composed by pious rhymsters. One of the poems preserved is simply an

elaboration of the catechism, and would not be counted among works of literature were it not for the fact that each article of the creed is followed by this refrain:

If you do not believe, turn your eyes to the flames

which burn your companions.

Answer in one or two words only—

You will either burn in this fire, or join us.

Provençal poetry is permeated with the idea of "sinful love," which is expounded in tedious poems. *Bréviaire d'Amour* by the master Matfre Ermengau[25] has 30,000 lines. Scholasticism enters poetry; the aforementioned poem also contains a chapter "On the Abjectness of Flesh." "Satan, wishing to inflict suffering on a man, instilled in him idolatrous love for a woman. Instead of worshipping his Creator with all his heart and with the whole force of his mind, with a burning love, he gives to a woman what belongs to God…Remember, whosoever reveres a woman reveres Satan, and makes the lawless demon his God."

Of course genuine troubadours still existed, and perhaps even had clandestine meetings and conventions. The last of them, Guiraut Riquier[26], died in 1280, almost forty years after the stakes of Montségur. His voice is sad, like the voice of a grasshopper among ruins. He was faithful to the tradition and for twenty years platonically loved the wife of the Viscount of Narbonne; the delicacy of his sentiments ensures him a place among the finest representatives of the genre. Towards the end of his life, he yielded to the new current and wrote only Marian hymns, where the confusion of objects of earthly and celestial love is almost too disturbing. "Until recently I sang of love, but truly I did not know what it was, taking vanity and madness for emotion; but now true love overwhelms me, forcing me to give my heart to a lady whom I shall never be able to worship as she deserves…I am not at all jealous of others who desire her heart, and I pray for her adorers, that she will hear the supplication of each."

The phenomenon of formalism can be studied in the troubadours' decadent poetry, as in an anatomical sample.

Formalism is not the excess of metaphor or linguistic ornament, but a procedure by which old means of expression try to render a new, changed emotional and historical atmosphere. We should add that it would be naïve to claim all troubadour poetry is a reflection of crystal purity and platonic love. History preserves the names of a number of poets like Sordel[27] and Bertran d'Alamanon, libertine poets notorious for their free-thinking poems and numerous scandals.

The poetry of the troubadours was always a mixture of flame and blue sky, but perhaps that is not the worst poetic alloy. The whole of Canto XXVI of the *Divine Comedy* is the color of deep purple and chilly radiance. In *Purgatory* the soul of a good poet, Amaut Daniel[28], awaits the day of its liberation. Dante constructs a beautiful monument to his master. The song ends in Provençal, and has the charm of fading beauty.

BUT LET US RETURN to our broken-off story. It is after the Treaty of Meaux and the council in Toulouse, which extended the Inquisition's control over the whole country. Not entirely, since irredentism still smolders in inaccessible castles. Other countries, and especially Lombardy—with which the heretics of Toulouse and Provence had always been in close contact—were relatively peaceful oases, and aided their sister church.

What was to be done? The apostolic activities of the Cathars were branded with all the miseries of conspiracy. The cities were unsafe, so the "perfected" met with believers in the mountains, in forest clearings; trailed by spies, delivered to the Inquisition yet undaunted, sneaking out under cover of night, under friendly glances, searching glances, glances inert with fear. Sometimes they managed to perch for a while over a shoemaker's last, or wearing a baker's hat, or practicing medicine—a profession beloved of Cathars and suited to their attitude of active charity.

In the meantime Raymond VII, following a policy of appeasement towards the Pope, made no secret of his desire to

get rid of the inquisitors. Trying to prove his goodwill, he initiated the capture and burning of a number of Albigensians, among them Deacon Jehan Cambitor and his three companions hiding in Montségur. The activities of the Inquisition in the duchy were suspended for three years between 1237 and 1241. It seemed that internal peace was near.

But quite unexpectedly in 1240 an avenger appears, descending upon the country with the speed of a rising mountain stream: Raymond Trencavel, the son of the Viscount of Béziers who had died in prison. With him are the lords of occupied castles, dispossessed by the French, and the fine Aragonese cavalry. The army advances rapidly, taking castles along the way that put up no resistance at all. But instead of striking at the capital Carcassonne, the young leader contents himself with minor victories. The French governor organizes the defense, sends a messenger to Paris and demands aid from the Count of Toulouse who, however, refuses in unequivocal terms. Young Trencavel furiously assaults the capital: the walls shake and crumble, but the relief led by Jean de Beaumont, Louis IX's chamberlain, forces the young warrior to retreat. The second fatal error of the campaign consists in Trencavel's marching westward, directly into the enemy's embrace, instead of retreating inland, where mountains and allies would guarantee a lasting defense. No wonder he has to barricade himself in Montréal. His defense, however, is so valiant that he receives honorable terms of surrender: permission to retreat with his armies and supplies to Aragon. The French begin to recapture the lost castles, less by means of siege-machines than by negotiations, although cruelty and violence are not totally absent.

The behavior of Raymond VII is full of contradictions. On the one hand it is known that he supported Trencavel, but at the same time he promised the Pope to destroy Montségur, the capital of the Cathars. Had the Count of Toulouse joined the battle against the French, he could have changed the course of events, but he looked fatalistically upon the defeat of his ally, just like his father apathetically watching the defeat of Raymond-Roger. *Historia magistra vitae*? If anyone ever tries

to write a psychoanalytic account of historical figures, these events deserve their own chapter.

As if feeling that he has slept through a perfect opportunity, the Count of Toulouse throws himself into a whirlpool of artful intrigue, which results in a strong anti-French coalition including Castille, Navarre, Aragon, and even Henry III of England. Certain of the strength of his alliances, Raymond VII denounces the Treaty of Meaux. The massacre in Avignonet speeds up events.

We have said that Raymond VII obtained from Pope Gregory IX the suspension of the inquisitorial activities of the preaching brothers. But in April 1242 the Bishop of Rome dies, and the Dominicans resume their work. In December of the same year a great stake burns heretics in Lavour.

In May 1242 the inquisitors Guillaume Arnaud and Étienne de St. Thibery arrive at the small town of Avignonet, situated in the center of the Lauraguais province. The whole party consists of eleven members of the tribunal; among them an ex-troubadour, Raymond de Costiran, canon of St. Stephen's cathedral in Toulouse, notaries, and process servers. They establish their quarters in the castle of Raymond d'Alfaro[29]. No one among the inquisitorial party suspects that, despite their good welcome, they are in fact already trapped. Though it is difficult to feel sympathy for an institution called the Inquisition, one has to respect the courage of people who enter unarmed a place known as a hotbed of heresy, in a de facto state of war. Raymond d'Alfaro notifies the garrison of Montségur and soon sixty armed men rush to Avignonet. The rebels stop at the town gates near the house of the lepers, where castellan Raymond's messenger hands them twelve axes. Then, led by Raymond d'Alfaro himself, the somber procession marches toward the chamber in which the inquisitors are asleep. When the door breaks under the blows of axes, the friars kneel on the floor, and begin to sing *Salve Regina*. The slaughter is full of fury and cruelty. Sources tell us that the broken skull of Guillaume Arnaud was used as a drinking cup by his murderer.

The temporary successes of the Count of Toulouse end when the French army sets out and very speedily eliminates all his allies, including Henry III, who retreats to Bordeaux after his defeat at Taillebourg.

Deserted by his vassals and allies, the Count of Toulouse remains alone, having no choice but to surrender once more to the Church and the King of France. In January 1243 a final treaty is signed in Lorris. Six years later Raymond VII dies without leaving a male heir. According to the treaty, his daughter marries Alphonse de Poitiers, the brother of Louis IX. In this way Languedoc is eternally bound to the French crown.

The victors turn their eyes to the south, toward two unconquered castles, the last bastions of the Albigensians.

Montségur, the holy city of the Cathars—now a name denoting an emptiness—stands amidst a wild, mountainous landscape. The mountain and the ruins today look like one gigantic anthill. From the south, an almost vertical cliff of solid rock falls into the valley. The position of Montségur is mysterious, since the castle does not "reign" over anything and guards no passage, as if its builders had other than practical reasons in mind. The very shape of the ruins resembles a long sarcophagus rather than a fortress. Our wonder grows when we follow a winding path toward the remains. The walls are bare and lack strategic characteristics: embrasures, battlements, towers. Moreover, this mysterious construction covers only a part of the mountain top. But the most amazing sight is two wide unfortified gates, unparalleled in medieval defensive architecture.

To all these puzzling details let us add an observation, that the layout of Montségur is quite exceptional. Research into the symbolism of art is not limited these days to the study of capitals, tympans, and other ornamental details, so that a pentagon of bare walls can convey its hidden sense. The metaphysics of architecture are expressed also in the module, the proportion of solids, the placing of windows, the direction of the building, and even in the materials and mortar. As for the castle in Montségur, its ground-plan permit the precise

determination of the position of the rising sun at different times of the year. Hence the daring hypothesis that Montségur was not a fortress but a Cathar temple, perhaps all that remains of the Manichaean cult.

Let us return to the facts. It is May 1243. Hugues des Arcis —the new royal seneschal of Carcassonne—with his ten-thousand-strong army, pitches his tents around Montségur, proclaimed a "synagogue of Satan." Behind a wooden palisade there are many deacons, prominent Albigensians, and "perfected" ones, with Bertrand Marty as their leader. The castle's garrison consists of fifteen knights and a hundred sergeants: no more than one hundred and fifty armed men. The French army surrounds Montségur in a semi-circle, only the southern part of the mountain is free of the besiegers: the almost vertical cliff plunging into an abyss, in which the defendants can see their fate.

Beginning their siege in May, the attackers thought that the sun would dry the cisterns in summer. After six months, with the situation unchanged, no one counted on heavenly assistance. Food supplies in the fortress were sufficient, and contacts with the outside world were maintained thanks to experienced mountaineers who lowered themselves on ropes from the vertical cliff at night. Considerable differences of altitude prevented the use of siege-machines; everything seemed to indicate that the nest of Cathars could not be taken by force but only by cunning.

The defenders and inhabitants of Montségur could not expect the mighty French army to strike its tents and depart some day. So almost five hundred people shut in the fortress, whom a common fate had made one family, have been preparing for death for many months.

The French manage to bribe some Basque volunteers, experienced mountaineers, who with great effort manage to reach a narrow platform eighty meters from the castle. In November the royal army receives considerable reinforcements. Durand, Bishop of Albi, comes to the camp. He offers technical rather than spiritual help, being an expert constructor of siege-machines, which soon take their part in

the battle. The situation is not yet hopeless, since Bertrand de la Baccalaria, whom we would now call a military engineer, arrives at the fortress by night. Now the defenders can enter into a dialogue of stone-throwing machines.

Winter is very hard for the besieged, there are many casualties, and rare reinforcements do not replace all those lost in fighting. Crowded into a small space of several hundred square meters, people become exhausted by the months of struggle. The commander of the garrison frequently sends messages to the Count of Toulouse asking whether everything is going well. The answer is affirmative, yet it is not known what this question refers to—preparations for a new uprising, a relief expedition, or negotiations.

The most dangerous weapon enters the battle—cunning. During one of the long winter nights a group of volunteers, led by a Basque guide knowing all the secret passages, crosses a dangerous crest and, deceiving the garrison with friendly shouts, massacres the defenders of the eastern tower in a surprise attack. The passage is so dangerous that the next day the French have to admit that they would never have dared to take it in full daylight. The situation of the defenders becomes increasingly grave, especially since Bishop Durand constructs a new machine near the walls of Montségur, which unceasingly pitches eighty-pound stones. The commander of defense, Pierre Roger de Mirepoix[31], orders the safekeeping of treasures belonging to the Cathar Church. Two Albigensians, Mathieu and Pierre Bonnet, gather the gold, silver, *pecuniam infinitam*, and hide it in a secure place.

Despite the hopelessness of the situation for those enclosed in the fortress, the siege continues and the defenders resist French assaults. The chronicler of the crusades Guillaume de Puylaurens writes: “The besieged were not given a moment of rest either at night or during the day.” The commander tries to secure help from outside. Corbario, the leader of the twenty-five Aragonese daredevils who would constitute a select commando unit in a modern army, promises to penetrate the lines of encirclement, recapture the eastern tower and destroy the French siege-machines. The circle of the besieging army is so tight, however, that the Aragonese have to abandon their

mission. The commander decides to make a desperate excursion at night. The enemies fight at the edge of an abyss in which many find their death. At dawn the battle shifts to the fortress walls, where the sisters and daughters of knights fight side by side with the men. The counterattack is repulsed with much bloodshed. After a night full of the moaning of the wounded, the trampled, and those fallen into the abyss from the walls of Montségur, a horn sounds. Raymond de Pereille[30] and Pierre Roger de Mirepoix go to the enemy's camp to negotiate. Montségur surrenders after nine months of siege.

The victors were so exhausted that they accepted the majority of the proposed conditions, which in effect proved to be quite advantageous. The defenders could keep Montségur for fifteen days, in order to celebrate an Albigensian holiday in mid-March. They were forgiven their past misdeeds, even the slaughter in Avignonet. The soldiers could leave the fortress with their weapons and possessions. They would be examined by the Inquisition, but only light punishments were to be exacted. Other persons sheltering in the castle could go free if they renounced heresy, otherwise they were to go to the stake. The fortress was to be handed over to the King of France.

So, after the signing of the treaty on March 2, 1244, the longed-for peace reigned in the town; the gift of fifteen days of freedom before death, fifteen days of leave-taking between those who would descend into the valleys with the spring winds, and those who would be consumed by the flames above. It is a thing worthy of the highest respect that, during the armistice, six women and eleven men converted to Catharism, which amounted to choosing a martyr's death. Martyrs of destroyed religions are not canonized.

On March 16, 1244, French soldiers, bishops, and inquisitors entered Montségur. Raymond de Pereille, one of the defense commanders, parted forever with his wife and his youngest daughter, who chose the stake. It was not the only farewell of families torn apart.

Soldiers built a huge stake at the foot of a mountain, in a place now called "Cramatchs"—from *prat dels crematz*, the field of the burned. Dry wood at that time of year is scarce, so

instead of the usual construction of twigs and poles to which the condemned were tied, they built a palisade strewn with a thick layer of brushwood. They pushed the chained Albigensians into this horrible enclosure. Sources give the number of two hundred men and women. The palisade was set alight from four sides. The wounded and the sick were thrown inside. The heat was so intense that witnesses had to retreat from the pyre. The singing of the clergy mingled with the cries of the dying.

At night, when human bodies still smoldered on the pyre, three Albigensians hiding in the cellars of Montségur sneaked out and lowered themselves down the vertical cliff. They carried away the remaining treasure, the holy books, and their testimony to martyrdom.

The heavy, nauseating smoke descends into the valleys and spreads across history.

DEFENSE OF THE TEMPLARS

HIGH JURY,

The task of the defense in this trial, which has lasted six and a half centuries, is not an easy one. We cannot summon the prosecutors, witnesses, or defendants, whose bodies were consumed by fire, their ashes scattered by the wind. Apparently everything speaks against them. The prosecutor has thrown down upon the table a pile of documents, from which an unbiased reader can reconstruct a somber picture of the crimes and misdeeds of the accused, and find convincing proof of guilt. Convincing, since the accused level the most severe accusation at themselves. Our task will be to call the reliability of these documents into question and to encourage you, High Jury, to read between the lines, to make you understand the background and mechanism, as well as the methods of the investigation. Thus we must return to events preceding this cool evening when the stake was set alight. The leaders of the Templars, Jacques de Molay[1] and Geoffroi de Charney[2], perished in its flames. The time and place of the execution: March 18, 1314, a small island on the Seine within the borders of Paris. The sole mercy granted to the executed was to die facing the white towers of Notre-Dame. The last words: “The bodies belong to the King of France, but the souls belong to God.”

Experts usually treat these final words with skepticism. Historians question their authenticity. But their value consists in the fact that they are the creation of collective consciousness, an attempt at synthesis, a definition of fate. Please admit them, High Jury, as yet another uncertain testimony.

And now, let us try to reconstruct briefly the history of the Templar Order.

Among the crusaders setting off to the Holy Land in 1095, there was an elderly nobleman from Champagne. As we know, this expedition resulted in the conquest of Jerusalem in 1099 and the creation of the Kingdom. But only a small number of western knights remained in Palestine. The vast majority, exhausted by bickering and the toils of war, returned home. The fate of the young Kingdom of Jerusalem, surrounded by a sea of infidels, was far from secure. In order to keep this island, not only stronger walls were needed, but a new society must be created. This old method of Greek and Roman colonists had its advocate in the chaplain of Baldwin I, Foucher de Chartres[3]. "We, who were people of the West," he wrote, "have become people of the East…We, who dwelled in Reims or Chartres, became citizens of Tyre and Antioch; we have already forgotten the place of our birth, and many do not know it at all. Some of us have houses and servants in this country, which we will give to our descendants as their inheritance. Others have married women who are not their countrywomen, but are the natives of Syria, Armenia or are even Saracens, who have received the grace of baptism. Some tend to their vineyards, others to their fields; they still speak in different tongues, but they already begin to understand each other; those who were poor in their country, God made rich; those who did not even have a manor, now rule over cities. Why should they return to the West, if they do so well in the East?" It is a noteworthy text, even if we reject the element of obvious official propaganda.

The new monarchy was more democratic, so to speak, and more republican than many monarchies in the West. Royal authority was limited by a parliament of both barons and burghers. And its voice was decisive in important matters, such as taxes. The peasants were free. Religious freedom was respected. In a number of temples there was the practice of *simultaneum*—religious celebration according to various rites and creeds. The Torah, Koran, and Bible, on which one swore oaths in front of tribunals, co-existed peacefully—probably for the first time in history, and not only in courtrooms. Of course

the real picture changed according to events, social tensions, and was far from ideal. However, one should be aware of this small-scale experimental effort to create a multi-racial, multi-religious society.

Let us return now to our knight from Champagne. His name was Hugues de Payns[4], and he was, as was said, of advanced age but brave and vigorous. He exchanged the green hills of his native country for the parched land of Palestine not for the material profit advertised so convincingly by Chaplain Foucher. With a handful of companions he founded an order whose task is to defend pilgrims from bandits and Saracens, and to protect cisterns. It is, in short, a kind of roadside militia. King Baldwin I assigned them a dwelling situated on the site of the Temple of Solomon, hence their name: the Templars. They took vows of purity and poverty. An ancient seal provides evidence, depicting two knights riding on one horse. If we can anticipate future events, High Jury, the second knight riding in the rear was interpreted during the investigation as Satan, the evil instigator. Truly, the inventiveness and imagination of slanderers, High Jury, knows no bounds.

Hugues de Payns travels to France and England, where the new Order is enthusiastically received in both lay and clerical circles. There is a flow of benefices and donations. The Order is joined by princes and barons. The ecumenical council in Troyes establishes its rule in 1128, and the highest moral authority in Europe, St. Bernard, becomes its spiritual sponsor. In his well-known *Liber Ad Milites Templi De Laude Novae Militiae*, he contrasts the austere, virtuous knights of the Temple with the newly enriched knights of the West who are “vain and indolent as women”.

“They dislike all excess in food and clothing, and they strive only for what is necessary. They live together, without women and children…offensive words, superfluous acts, unmitigated laughter, complaining and grumbling if noticed, do not pass among them unpunished. They abhor chess and dice, they are repulsed by hunting. They find no pleasure in the mindless pursuit of fowl, they are revolted by and avoid mimes, magicians, jugglers, frivolous songs and jokes. They

cut their hair short, and they know from the Apostles that care for grooming shames a man. No one ever saw them use a comb; they wash rarely, their beards are rough, full of dust, stained by heat and toil."

In Jerusalem the Templars soon took over two mosques, under which there were huge vaults designed as stables. In fact the fortified Templum was a city within a city. Life there was isolated, austere, and simple. Meals were served in a vast refectory with unadorned walls. The knightly monks ate in silence and left a portion of their food for the poor. When one of the brothers died, his ration was given to a beggar for fourteen days. Three days a week no meat was served, twice a year there was a complete fast. The day began with a mass celebrated two hours before sunrise. Then each knight visited the stables and his horse, and inspected his weapons. At sunrise there was another mass, and during the day there were dozens of obligatory prayers. Lunch, then a sort of roll-call supervised by the Master. Vespers, prayers, dinner, and silence until the end of the day. The rule also contained a penal code. Ten offenses were punishable with exclusion from the Order, or even life imprisonment. These were: simony to gain admittance to the Order, repetition of conversations heard in the chapter, theft, desertion from the battlefield, looting, murder of a Christian, sodomy, heresy (this offense, High Jury, should be kept in mind), lying, and abandoning the Order.

Laudatory remarks by St. Bernard of Clairvaux (O paradox of history) made the Templars powerful bankers in the Middle Ages. During the Second Crusade, the Order had many properties almost throughout the whole of Europe. Pilgrims traveling to the Holy Land, in order to avoid risk, would deposit money in one of their houses and receive the equivalent in Jerusalem. That they soon became creditors not only to the King of Jerusalem, but also to sovereigns of England and France is evidence of their financial power. This very fact, High Jury, as we shall try to demonstrate, became the source of their downfall.

The Order's profits did not enrich its members. There was a strict rule that if a deceased brother was found to be carrying money, he had to be buried in unconsecrated ground.

The Templars, who from a handful of monk-knights became an army of many thousands, were known as outstanding warriors. Let us call on the evidence of Louis VII, who wrote to Abbot Suger: “I cannot imagine how we would be able to hold our ground in this country (the Holy Land) without their assistance and presence. We ask you therefore to double your kindness to them, so that they feel we stand behind them.” There is reference further to the large sum of two thousand marks lent to the sovereign, and a request that the regent-abbot return it to the Order in France. Until the middle of the twelfth century we cannot find a single document mentioning the Templars which does not extol their knightly virtues and loyalty.

And then? It is obvious, High Jury, that every social organism has its bright and dark moments. But the prosecutor has omitted all those facts which could speak in the defendants’ favor. He has ignored the heroic period of the Order, underscoring only those moments which show its decadence and secularization, abandonment of its deals, vanity and intrigues. The defense is far from a blind glorification of the Templars: we shall not challenge the prosecution where documents and sources testify against the Order. We submit, however, that these facts should not be treated in isolation, but be judged against the political and social background of their time.

The history of the Kingdom of Jerusalem belongs to one of the most complicated and obscure chapters of history. Studying this period, we have the impression of looking into a simmering cauldron of passions, intrigues, lust for fame and fortune, unnatural ambitions, complex political and dynastic machinations. The Templars, who had become a force of over ten thousand knights, could not stand aside and watch events on which not only their prestige and profit rested, as the prosecutor says, but also their lives. They were forced to get involved in power politics. But let us add, High Jury, that they also participated in every great battle, sharing the crusaders’ miseries for two centuries: imprisonment, long sieges, marches through the desert, wounds and death. The crusaders came and went, and the miscalculations of their military raids fell on the

heads of those who, like the Templars, decided to hold on to the patch of conquered land until the very end. This is, High Jury, a commentary indispensable to our understanding of the affairs and politics of the Order.

In 1187 Saladin recaptures Jerusalem from the crusaders. For a long time the Kingdom is without a capital. Two years later the Third Crusade begins. Three great sovereigns could have changed the run of bad luck, yet it happened otherwise. Frederick Barbarossa[5] was eliminated by an accident—death in the undertow of a river. Richard the Lion-Heart[6] is engaged in rivalry with Philip Augustus[7] from the outset. Upon learning that the French monarch paid his followers three pieces of gold, Richard sold Cyprus to the Templars and announced that those who chose his banner would receive four gold pieces.

The result: Philip withdrew from the expedition. What is more, despite Saladin's intervention, in which the Order served as an intermediary (later this fact will be used to prove that the Templars had good relations, or even plotted, with the Muslims), he murdered 2,700 captives, which provoked the massacre of Frankish prisoners in retaliation. Nevertheless, the Templars were the vanguard of the ill-fated expedition, from which Richard withdrew upon learning that John Lackland[8] had claimed his throne. He left Palestine on a Templar ship, dressed in a cassock of the Order.

In the second decade of the thirteenth century, the already bad situation of the Kingdom of Jerusalem was worsened by the Mongol invasion. Pope Honorius III persuaded the German Emperor, Frederick II[9], to marry the heiress to the Jerusalem throne, Isabella[10], the daughter of Jean de Brienne[11]. The Emperor reached hungrily for the fruit presented to him, forced the King to flee, and entertained an alliance with the Sultan of Egypt, which brought about his excommunication.

Let us add that the traditional policy of the Templars was based on quite opposite premises: on maintaining good relations with the Sultan of Damascus, which yielded good results and followed the old principle of exploiting differences in the opponent's camp. Through the Emperor's alliances

Jerusalem was reclaimed, and Frederick illegally had himself proclaimed King. The capital was at last in Christian hands, which might seem to be a signal for pride and rejoicing. But it turned out that according to a secret agreement with the Sultan, Jerusalem was not to be fortified or defended. The entire district which belonged to the Templars, who from the beginning opposed the excommunicated ruler, was given to the Muslims. The Emperor also endowed them with property which was not his, namely the fortresses of the Order: Safet, Toron, Gaza, Darum, Krak, and Montréal. As if that were not enough, Frederick took over the Order's castle, Château Pélerin.

One can hardly be surprised, High Jury, that the Templars were overcome by rage. They notified the Emperor that if he did not leave Palestine, "they would lock him in a place from which he would never depart." Alarmed by the uprising of the Guelphs, Frederick set out for Europe, leaving the power and care of the Kingdom to the Teutonic Knights, well known to Poles and hostile toward the Templars. From a safe distance he initiated a campaign of slander against the Order which had dared to oppose his will. He repeated the old charge discrediting the Templars in the eyes of the Christian world: they plot with the infidels. He himself, with typical cynicism, assumed Eastern habits, maintaining good relations with the Sultan of Damascus. At his court he was host to the ambassador of the Sultan of Egypt. He even received the envoys of the Ismail sect of the Assassins, who in all probability killed at his instigation his opponent, Duke Louis of Bavaria.

Finally in 1248 there came the crusade of Louis IX. One might expect that this time there would be harmonious cooperation between the crusaders and the local knights. The disinterestedness of the leader of the expedition and his good relations with the Templars should have assured that much. Unfortunately, the plans of the expedition were prepared in Europe and completely overlooked local conditions. Against the advice of the Templars, the hopeless campaign against Egypt recommenced. Despite the Order's opposition, its knights formed the vanguard of the army led by the King's

brother, Robert, Count of Artois. The Nile split the army into two parts. Against the arguments of the experienced Templars, Robert decided not to wait for the rest of the forces, and after a short, victorious battle with the Turks, moved into the heart of the country. But in the narrow streets of Mansourah the crusaders were met by the Sultan Baybars and his Mamelukes[12]. From the roofs and barricades came a hail of missiles. Trapped, lacerated with arrows like hedgehogs, the crusaders suffered a crushing defeat. The Sultan's counterattack resulted in a disastrous situation for the royal army: scurvy, hunger, and ditches filled with corpses forced Louis to surrender. Then came captivity, from which the ailing King had to be ransomed for the staggering sum of 500,000 pounds.

Aware of the political misjudgments, in which' they had had no part, the Templars started negotiations with Damascus. Learning of this, Louis IX took strict disciplinary measures, including the dismissal of the Grand Master of the Order and the banishment of those who tried to conclude a treaty without his consent.

High Jury, these three selected but crucial episodes clearly illustrate the permanently endangered state of the Order, growing misunderstandings, numerous humiliations—the ever rewoven web of intrigues in which it was snared.

The sole consolation was the favor of the popes, who interceded effectively on their behalf in a number of conflicts. In the end, even this support was lost.

The Marshal of the Templars, Étienne de Sissey, was summoned to Rome in 1263 and stripped of his powers. If we are to believe the chronicler Gérard de Montréal, the reason was an amorous affair, a notorious and compromising rivalry for the favors of a certain beautiful lady from Akra.

The final act of the drama began on April 5, 1291, in this very town, Akra. It was a port and defended itself for two and a half months. The situation of the crusaders was hopeless. Though they could have easily abandoned the fortress, a group of monk-knights together with the Grand Master, Guillaume de Beaujeu[13], remained in their hopeless position and

defended it to the end. Akra was drowned in the onslaught. The Kingdom of the Crusaders ceased to exist.

HIGH JURY: AFTER THIS extensive but necessary introduction, the defense will address itself to the central issue: that is, to the trial of the Templars (then led by the Grand Master, Jacques de Molay) staged by the grandson of Louis IX, Philip the Fair[14], King of France. His hard-handed rule was dictatorial almost in the modern sense of the word, and he is justly considered as a prototypical European autocrat. His numerous wars exhausted the state treasury. His rule was characterized by a series of profound economic crises. Almost from the day he was enthroned, Philip was in conflict with the Holy See, which, as we know, led to the Pope's captivity in Avignon. These political elements played a decisive role in the trial of the Templars.

The trial was conducted, High Jury, in order to eliminate an autonomous power independent of the state. It was conducted in order to plunder—I shall not hesitate to use the word—the Order's wealth. It was conducted, thirdly, in order to prevent the Templars, who were the third power, and an international power to boot, from siding with the Vatican in the confrontation between the King and the Pope. We shall attempt to demonstrate that the religious, moral, and ideological accusations leveled at the Order during the trial were but a smokescreen for the political motives of the entire operation.

Despite the loss of their properties in the Kingdom of Jerusalem, the Order was a force which every realistically-minded sovereign had to take into account. Twenty thousand armed Templars could decide the fate not only of battles, but of wars. They had properties and castles not only in France, but also in Italy, Sicily, Portugal, Castile, Aragon, England, Germany, Bohemia, Hungary, and even in Poland, where they kept two battalions and supported the armies of King Henry the Pious[15] in the Battle of Legnica[16]. Two centers, however,

had special importance: Cyprus—a strategic center and base for expeditions to the East, and Paris—the political center.

In the French capital the walled Templars' quarter was a true city within a city, with separate jurisdiction, administration, and the right of asylum. Philip the Fair's relations with the papacy were clear and wholly unscrupulous. He viewed the papal bulls flying at "our dear son," and the persuasive *Ausculta fili* as if they were exotic birds from a distant epoch. The ultimatum issued by the Council of Rome in 1302 had only one effect: the King established the Estates General which would accept his politics "in the name of the nation." What is the theory of two swords to someone who trusts only one, the one in hand? Philip's response to Boniface VIII's proposed excommunication was to send an envoy, Guillaume de Nogaret, to Italy to bring the Pope to France by force.

What was the Templars' attitude toward Philip? The prosecutor has told us that according to numerous proofs, retired officers (that is how one could describe the Order's situation after the fall of the Kingdom of Jerusalem) like to plot. The facts, however, testify to their deep loyalty to the French sovereign, and at least give him their financial, but quite decisive, support in his doings. Nothing foreshadows the conflict, there are no warning signs, but in the inner circle of royal counselors a plan of attack ripens. In the same year that the King declares "our genuine and particular attachment" to the Order, an occasion arises to provide the necessary pretext for the affair to begin. As the High Jury has probably guessed, we are talking about a secret denunciation.

At the beginning of 1305, a certain Noffo Dei, a Florentine and let us add, a criminal, gives a deposition in prison, which accuses the Templars of apostasy and immoral conduct. Moreover the King is feverishly collecting information from brothers expelled from the Order. The castles and homes of the Templars are invaded by an army of spies.

At the same time, without any connection to the denunciations, the new Pope, Clement V, proposes a merger of the Templar Order with the Order of the Hospitallers[17]. The

purpose was to join forces before a new crusade, which was not in fact ever launched. The Grand Master Jacques de Molay rejects this suggestion. One can guess that his decisive motive was not just pride but the difficulty of reconciling two rules. This move would prove tragic in its results.

When we reflect, High Jury, on the trial of the Templars, we should note that Philip the Fair was not acting solely on cold calculation. His attitude towards the Order contained an element of authentic passion. It is a psychological moment not without importance. We shall try to explain.

Towards the end of 1305, after the third currency devaluation, the *petit peuple* of Paris rebelled. The upheavals reached such a state that the endangered King and his family were forced to escape to the Templars' fortress, the famous "Tour du Temple," where he endured a humiliating siege by the "mob." Within a few days the leaders of the rebellion were hanged at the gates of Paris, but the taste of defeat was bitter. Nothing humiliates a monarch more than the feeling of gratitude, especially towards those whom one is about to pronounce criminals. In the same year Philip conducted an operation which was like a dress rehearsal for the trial of the Templars. The object of the maneuvers was a defenseless nation, the Jews, whose property was confiscated, they themselves cruelly tortured, and finally condemned to banishment.

Philip the Fair knew that in a widespread action the political police should act swiftly to eliminate any danger of resistance. The thunderbolt must strike before the victim sees the lightning.

On Thursday, October 12, 1307, Jacques de Molay walked beside the King in the mourners' procession at the funeral of the wife of Charles of Valois. On Friday at dawn, the very next day, all the Templars in France were arrested. We must bow, High Jury, in sad admiration of this unprecedented mastery of the police machine.

The prosecutor has said that the imprisonment of the Templars surprised no one, that charges against them were voiced many times, that they were so to speak in the air. He

added that Philip the Fair conferred with Pope Clement V over this matter, but again he omitted the background of these talks. For it is known that these negotiations concerned a new crusade. The Pope wanted to send as its leader the dangerous papal kidnapper, Nogaret, who was under a curse, in the hope of breaking his political career and returning him to the path of virtue. The idea of a crusade, however, was totally alien to Philip. He presented its difficulties, claiming trouble in the Templar Order, which, as usual, was to constitute the nucleus of the army setting out for the East. The prosecution also, has ignored the important fact that the Order's Master Jacques de Molay himself asked the Pope for an investigation to clear the Order of frequent yet vague accusations. Clement V in turn, unable to find reliable evidence against the Templars, in September 1307 asked Philip the Fair for the results of his investigation. It is obvious, High Jury, that the King could not compromise himself by providing testimonies of criminals or obviously bribed brothers who had been expelled from the Order. One had to extract, by means of a hot iron, self-accusations from those who currently belonged to the Order.

The warrant of arrest sent to barons, prelates, and royal officials in the provinces is a masterpiece of rhetoric: "It is a bitter thing, a lamentable matter, a matter truly horrible to contemplate, and terrible to hear about—an odious crime, an execrable evil, an appalling act, a detestable disgrace—truly inhuman deeds have reached our ears, causing our deep astonishment, and most shocked revulsion…" High Jury, please count the adjectives in this opening sentence. An abundance of adjectives is a sure sign not only of bad poetry but also of accusations weak on proof; further on the text contains nothing but the gurgle of rage.

The investigation immediately followed the arrests and was conducted by lay authorities. Instructions for the commissioners recommend "rigorous examination of the truth, if necessary with the use of torture." The accused are faced with the alternative: either confess to the alleged crimes and be pardoned, or die at the stake.

Progress in civilization, High Jury, consists mainly in the fact that simple tools for splitting heads were replaced by

hatchet-words, which have the advantage of psychologically paralyzing an opponent. Such words are: “corruptor of minds,” “witch”, and “heretic.” Of course the Templars were accused of heresy, chiefly to deprive the Pope of the possibility of intervening on their behalf. The battle was difficult from the start. Philip the Fair had force, the Holy See merely diplomacy.

Now comes the moment most taxing for the defense, and it is hardly surprising that the prosecution placed its emphasis here. It is indeed a fact that Jacques de Molay admitted publicly, in the presence of representatives of the Church, theologians, and the University of Paris, that there was a long-standing custom practiced during the admission of new brothers: they denounced Christ and spat on the Cross. Another dignitary of the Order, Geoffroi de Charney, gave a similar testimony, stressing however that he himself was never involved in such practices, as they were contrary to the principles of the Creed. One should add that both confessions were made just twelve days after the arrests, which may suggest that they were spontaneous. Let us remember, however, that for suspects under investigation time is not measured in days, but in hours, and that conforming to royal instructions the investigative apparatus worked “rigorously.”

It is more than probable that the Grand Master, who as the trial demonstrated was a very naive politician, was promised that public confession of guilt would save the Order as a whole. Moreover, the very act of spitting on the Cross does not indicate apostasy, but in the opinion of many experts may be an element of initiation, dialectical in character. One might recall the well-known ritual of knighting, when a symbolic slap in the face is the only affront that a knight must endure without return. As for the fact itself, the testimonies of various Templars are contradictory. Some say that they were spitting not on the Cross, but to the side. Others categorically deny the practice existed. Geoffroi de Gonneville explained that the custom was introduced by a bad Master, who having been in Saracen captivity, regained his freedom by renouncing Christ. But the same Geoffroi could not identify this bad Master.

Brother Gerard de Pasagio declared: “A novice entering the Order was presented with a wooden crucifix and asked if that was God. He answered that it was the image of the Crucified. A receiving brother told him: ‘Do not believe it. That is but a piece of wood. Our Lord is in Heaven.’” It is evidence against idolatry, of which the Templars were accused, and a proof of the high spiritualization of their faith. In short, High Jury, the testimonies are contradictory as to the custom itself and as to its origin. Most importantly, no written records and above all no preserved rule contains such an ordinance.

Similarly in the case of the idol, which was said to be venerated by the Templars, and on the subject of which a sea of ink was spilled, so that even if it were an angel it would have turned into a devil. The Inquisitor Guillaume de Paris[18], instructed the investigative organs to quiz the accused about the statue with a human head and a long beard. Here again the statements of the accused are contradictory and vague. For some it was a statue of wood, for others of silver and leather; feminine or masculine; bare-faced or bearded; resembling a cat or a pig; it had one head, or two, or even three. Despite the confiscation of all sacred objects, nothing resembling the descriptions could be found.

What we have here, High Jury, is a classic case of collective psychosis. And we—who know the logic of fear, the psychopathology of a hunted man, the theory of group behavior in the face of annihilation—we should not believe it. Let us remember that the medieval imagination was haunted by the devil. Who could better explain to the tortured, to those imprisoned in dark dungeons, the sense of their fate?

What remains, High Jury, is the name of that demon. It has survived until our time, being the subject of numerous experts’ consideration. Not the object, but the word is the sole evidence in this trial. Let us at last utter this name: Baphomet.

A German expert, the Orientalist Baron von Hammer-Purgstall, derives the origin of the demon’s name from the word Bahumid, which was supposed to mean an ox. Hence he came to the conclusion that it was a case of the cult of the Golden Calf, of which the Templars were in fact accused. This

thesis did not hold water and the author himself later exchanged it for an equally unconvincing one. A student of the Templars and prominent scholar, Emil Michelet, saw in it an acronym which according to the Cabbala should be read backwards: *TEMpli Omnium Hominum Pacis ABbas.* It was noted also that the name could have originated from a port held by the Templars: Bapho, where in ancient times there was a temple of Astarte—Venus and Moon[19], Virgin and Mother—to whom children were sacrificed. This hypothesis was mentioned by the prosecutor, who followed a line of fantastic charges against the Templars, including cannibalism.

A rather plausible explanation, at least from a philological point of view, was provided at the beginning of the nineteenth century by an outstanding Arabist, Sylvestre de Sacy, who derived the name from the garbled name of Mahomet. This theory was supported by a poem composed by the Templar Oliver in the *langue d'oc, "E Bafonet obra de son poder"* ("And Mahomet flared with his might"). It is by no means proof, as the prosecution would have it, of the infiltration of the Templars' esoteric doctrine by Islam. Though they were attracted to a certain extent to the religions of the East, no document indicates that they were a religious sect. In their minds the perspective on faith was certainly enlarged. What was an axiom for every French nobleman setting forth on a crusade—that Christianity was the only religion worthy of its name—was unsettled by new contacts and experiences. The Koran, recognizing Christ as one of the Prophets, certainly facilitated that process.

Let us return from the East, which at the time of our story is just a memory and an echo, to France where a game is being played in which the life and honor of the Order is at stake. As becomes a modern leader, Philip the Fair could use propaganda with outstanding skill. As the tortured moan in dungeons throughout France, the King writes a letter to European sovereigns denouncing the "crimes" of the Templars. However, not all gave credence to the charges. The King of England, Edward II, saw them as calumnies and conveyed his favorable disposition towards the Templars to the kings of Portugal, Castile, Aragon, and Sicily, and to the

Pope himself. One can easily deduce from this that the allegedly bad reputation of the Templars was not as universal as the prosecution would have us believe.

After the initial self-accusation extracted from the Grand Master, the Templars had only one hope, namely that they would be entrusted to Church jurisdiction, or more precisely, that they would be judged by the Pope. And in fact toward the end of 1307 the King agreed to send the prisoners to Clement V. Hearing this news, the Templars revoked their testimonies en masse. According to tradition, Jacques de Molay did so in front of a crowd gathered in a church, showing them the marks of his torture.

Seeing the threads of the intrigue slipping through his fingers, Philip presses the pedal of propaganda—this time internal propaganda. Letters circulate in Paris accusing the Pope of being bribed by the Templars. Nothing fosters emotion better than pecuniary arguments. Having excited the mob, the King turns towards parliament and the University of Paris for support of his anti-papal politics, demanding a statement on the Templars. The university, however, responds that matters of heresy should be judged by an ecclesiastical tribunal. This offers additional proof that not all of public opinion turned against the Order.

The intellectuals, as usual, proved unreliable; but the parliament which assembled in May 1308 in Tours—admittedly incomplete, since many noblemen preferred to excuse their absence than to take part in the farce—after acquainting itself with the forced testimonies, declares that the Templars deserve a death sentence. Strengthened by public opinion, Philip travels to Poitiers to meet the Pope.

Clement V confronted the King in a masterly way, immediately turning the conversation to matters of the crusade while keeping silent about the trial of the Templars. The King had no alternative but to use his faithful dignitaries of the Church, the archbishops of Narbonne and Bourges, who at a staged meeting together with royal confidants violently attacked the Order, the indifference of ecclesiastical power in the affair, sparing no offensive words against the Pope himself.

Clement V maintained his position. He even remarked that some of the Templars' testimonies seemed insufficiently plausible, and in order to gain time announced that the Council of Vienna due to gather the next year would address itself to the matter of the Order. He also demanded to see the principal defendants.

The defendants were transported by armed convoy from Paris to Poitiers. The journey was suddenly interrupted in Chinon, on the pretext of indisposition on the part of the accused. Beyond any doubt, High Jury, it was a scheme prepared in advance. Chinon, whose somber ruins have been preserved to this day, was a very suitable place for that stopover because of its immense dungeons. When the Pope's envoys reached the place of new torment, accompanied by the sworn enemies of the Templars, Nogaret and Plaisians, the accused kept silent or admitted their guilt. Returned to the dungeons, they could write their testament on the walls.

Examining the dossier of the case, one easily notices how often the interrogated retract their testimonies, only to return, after some days, to the most severe self-accusations. One cannot explain it except by the use of fire, cauldron, estrapade, iron boots, and hoop-iron.

The defense takes the liberty of quoting fragments from some of the testimonies.

Ponsard de Gizy, November 29, 1309:

"Asked if he was subjected to torture, he answered that three months ago when he had testified before the Lord Bishop of Paris, he was thrown into a pit with his hands tied so tightly that blood ran from his nails; he had said then that if they tormented him, he would recant previous testimonies and say everything they wanted. He was ready for anything, only to make his suffering short, a beheading, the stake, submersion in boiling water, but he could not bear the long torment he had to endure in prison for over two years."

Brother Bernard from Albi:

"I was tortured so much, so long was I interrogated and held in the fire, that my feet are burned, and I felt my bones

breaking inside me."

Brother Aimery de Villiers-le-Duc, May 13, 1310:

The protocol says that the accused was pale and terrified. He had sworn with his hand on the altar that the crimes of which the Order was accused were an invention. "If I lie, let my body and soul be consumed by Hell right here on the spot." When his previous testimonies were read to him, he answered: "Yes, I confessed many misdeeds, but that was because of the torment inflicted upon me by royal knights, Guillaume de Marcilly and Hugues de la Celle during my interrogation. Yesterday I saw fifty-four of my brothers taken on carts to be burned alive…Ah, if I am going to die at the stake, I shall confess that I am very afraid of death, that I cannot endure it, I shall yield…I shall confess under oath, in front of you, in front of any one, to any crime you charge the Order with; I shall admit I have killed God if they so demand."

I would like to stress, High Jury, the psychological aspect of death at the stake. The animal fear of fire rests on the knowledge that it will inflict the most acute pain. What spiritual strength is needed to keep faith that we will carry even the smallest part of our being away from this most destructive element. For medieval society the taste of ash was not, as for us, the taste of nothingness. Death at the stake was the vestibule of Hell, a never—ending stake where bodies suffer inextinguishable pain. The physical fire merged with the spiritual. Present torment foreshadows eternal torment. Heaven—the seat of the chosen, the cool, silent masses of air —was in the eyes of the dying remote and unattainable.

At the beginning of 1309, the investigation is renewed. This new phase is characterized by tightening of the screws of the machine for extracting testimonies (in Paris alone, thirty-six Templars died during interrogation). On the other hand, a seemingly inexplicable thing happens: the unprecedented resistance of the prisoners, who abandon all tricks and politics. Jacques de Molay states that he will defend the Order, but only in front of the Pope. Other brothers make similar declarations. By May 2, the number of Templars ready to defend the Order has grown to five hundred and sixty-three. The answer to this

mass resistance is a stake at which fifty-four Templars perish. The old Roman method of decimation triumphs again.

In June 1311 the proceedings are closed and the dossier of the investigation is sent to the Pope. The Council of Vienne did not bring the expected relief for the Order. These were the years of the Avignon captivity, and the Pope considered the case as lost. The Bull dissolved the Order, yet it did not contain a condemnation of the Templars. Their property was to be handed over to the Hospitallers. The blood of the brothers of the Temple did not turn into Philip's gold.

But the prisons of France were full; and something had to be done with the dignitaries of the Order, who wanted to defend themselves before the tribunal, "since we do not even have four pennies to pay for another defence." They ceaselessly demand to be brought before a papal tribunal.

The investigation was over, however, and the envoys of Clement V were passive presences at the sentencing. The leaders of the Templars faced life imprisonment. The sentence of Jacques de Molay and Geoffroi de Charney was read in Notre-Dame Cathedral. A great crowd listened in silence; but before the reading of the sentence could be completed, both men—perhaps the exalted Gothic of Notre-Dame exercised its influence—faced the people and shouted down the charges of crime and heresy leveled against the Templars whose rule "was always sacred, right and Catholic." A sentry's heavy hand fell on the mouth of the Master to muffle the last words of the condemned. The cardinals handed over the recalcitrant to the court of Paris. Philip the Fair commanded burning at the stake on the same day. To appease his anger, he gave to the flames another thirty-six uncompromising brothers.

High Jury, that appears to be the end of the drama of the Templar Order. Experts rummage the tombs for a clue to the mystery. Sometimes they succeeded in finding the chain of ages, sometimes they are fascinated by the smile of the alleged Baphomet found on a portal. The defense set itself a more modest task: examination of the instruments.

In history nothing is definitively closed. The methods used against the Templars enriched the repertoire of power. That is

why we cannot leave this distant affair to the pale fingers of archivists.

PIERO DELLA FRANCESCA

For Jarosław Iwaszkiewicz

FRIENDS SAY: WELL, so you were there and saw a lot; you liked Duccio, and the Dorian columns, and the stained glass at Chartres, and the Lascaux bulls—but tell us what you chose for yourself, who is the painter closest to your heart, the one you'd never give up for any other. A reasonable question since every love, if true, should destroy the previous one, should enter, overwhelm your whole being, and demand exclusiveness. So I pause to think and reply: Piero della Francesca.

The first meeting: in London at the National Gallery. A cloudy day. A choking fog descends upon the city. Though I did not intend to visit sights that day, I was forced to find shelter against the stifling damp. The impression came completely unexpectedly. From the first room it was apparent: the London museum collection surpasses the Louvre. Never had I seen so many masterpieces at once. Perhaps this is not the best way to become acquainted with art. In a concert programme, apart from Scarlatti, Bach, Mozart, it is good to include, say, a second rate composer—for instruction rather than out of perversity.

I stayed longest with a painter whose name I had only known from books. The painting was *The Nativity*, an unusual composition full of light and grave joy that leaps out at you. The impression was similar to my first encounter with Van Eyck. It is difficult to define such an aesthetic shock. The picture roots you to one spot. You cannot step back or move

closer or (as with modern painting) smell the paint and examine the facture treatment. The background of *The Nativity* is a humble shed, or rather a crumbling brick wall with a light, slanted roof. In the foreground the Christ child rests on a patch of grass worn like an old rug. Behind the child and facing the spectator, stands a choir of five angels, barefoot, earthy, strong as columns. Their peasant faces contrast with the luminous countenance of the Madonna (as in Baldovinetti[1]) who kneels to the right in mute adoration. The fragile candles of her beautiful hands are alight. In the background we see the massive torso of a bull, a donkey, two Flemish-looking shepherds, and St. Joseph turning his profile to the viewer. At the sides are two landscapes like windows through which sparkling light pours. Despite some damage, the colors are as clear and resonant as stained glass. Painted in the last years of the artist's career, it is as someone eloquently said "Piero's evening prayer to childhood and dawn."

On the opposite wall, *The Baptism of Christ*. One of the first surviving canvases of Piero. It has the same solemn architectural serenity as *The Nativity*, though painted earlier. The solid flesh of the figures contrasts with the light, melodious, pure landscape. There is a finality in the leaves cast like cards upon the sky—a moment transformed into eternity.

Goethe's wise dictum: "Wer den Dichter[2] will verstehen, muss in Dichters Lande gehen." In the sphere of painting, this translates as follows: as the fruits of light, paintings should be viewed under the artist's native sun. Sassetta seems out of place in the most attractive American museum. I therefore decided to make the pilgrimage to Piero della Francesca. Since my means were modest, I surrendered to chance and adventure. My story does not follow a chronology so relished by historians.

I got to Perugia first. This sombre town, probably the darkest in Italy, dwells in the green-golden Umbrian landscape, imprisoned in walls to this day. Suspended on a high cliff above the Tiber, it has been compared to a giant's hand—marked by its cruel and violent history as an Etruscan,

Roman, and Gothic town. It is symbolized by the Palazzo dei Priori, a powerful edifice with metal ornaments and a wall bent like molten iron. A fantastic labyrinth of streets, stairs, passages, and cellars—an architectural replica of the inhabitants' anxious spirit—lies behind the square which was once the site of the ruined Palazzo Baglioni, but is now occupied by elegant hotels.

"*I Perugini sono angeli o demoni,*" said Aretino[3]. The town's coat of arms: a griffin with open jaw and ferocious talons. At the height of its power, the Perugian republic ruled over Umbria, a territory defended by one hundred and twenty castles. The temperament of its citizens was best exemplified by the Baglioni family, whose members seldom died a natural death. They were vengeful and cruel, artistically refined enough to slaughter their enemies on beautiful summer evenings. The first "pictures" of the Perugian school were military banners. Churches here have the character of bastions, and the lovely fountain of Giovanni Pisano[4] served as a water reservoir during numerous sieges, rather than as an object of aesthetic contemplation. After prolonged internal struggles the town fell to the papacy, which to bring it definitely under the yoke constructed a citadel *ad coercendam Perusinorum audaciam*.

In the morning I had breakfast in a small bistro, cool as a cellar. Opposite sat a gray-haired man with a shaggy face, narrow eyes, and the posture of a retired boxer. He reminded me of a picture of Hemingway I'd seen. But it turned out (as the proprietor proudly pointed out) it was Ezra Pound. The right man in the right place—an impetuous man who would feel at home in the company of the Baglionis.

In the middle of the fifteenth century Piero della Francesca —then a mature artist and, like his colleagues, a "wandering craftsmen"—traveled to Rome to paint frescoes in the chambers of Pope Pius II which were sadly destroyed. On his way he stopped in Perugia.

His polyptych, *Madonna and Child with Four Saints*, remains in the Perugia Pinacoteca. It has an astonishing background. A gold background at the height of the

Quattrocento! The riddle is explained by his contract with the monastery of S. Antonio delle Monache. Piero painted the saints in abstract heavenly glory, rather than against a landscape, to suit the conservative, eternal taste of the brethren. Though it is not Piero's best work, it displays a characteristic bluntness in his treatment of human form, with solid heads and shoulders like treetops.

Most astonishing is the polyptych's predella portraying St. Francis receiving the stigmata—here the Renaissance master makes a direct reference to the tradition of Giotto. The figures of two monks in a desert landscape on cracked earth brushed with ashes, with a Byzantine bird overhead—Christ.

Arezzo lies halfway between Perugia and Florence. A town that clings to a hill capped by a citadel. Here Petrarch was born—the son of a Florentine exile—who later discovered the homeland of exiles: philosophy, and also Aretino, "whose tongue wounded the living and the dead and who spared only God, explaining that he did not know him."

St. Francis's church is dark and austere. You have to walk the length of an immense, unlit vestibule of darkness to reach the organ-loft and one of painting's greatest wonders of all time: *The Legend of the True Cross*, a sequence of fourteen frescoes painted by Piero in his full maturity, between 1452 and 1466. The subject is derived from the apocryphal gospel of Nicodemus and Jacobus de Voragine's[5] *Golden Legend*. Let us try to describe the fresco (a hopeless undertaking).

The Death of Adam. According to legend, the tree of the Cross grew from the seed placed under the tongue of the dying Father of Humankind. A naked Adam expires in the arms of aged Eve. Piero's elders are unlike those ruins of men Rembrandt liked to paint. They possess the pathos and wisdom of dying animals. Eve asks Seth to return to the Garden of Eden to bring an olive which will cure Adam. On the left, Seth talks with an angel in front of the Gate of Paradise. Adam lies in the center—stiffly laid out under a desperately bare tree as Seth places the seed in his mouth. A few figures bend their heads over the dead man. A woman with outspread arms cries voicelessly. Her cry carries not terror but prophesy. The entire

scene is exalted, simple, and Hellenic, like verses of the Old Testament written by Aeschylus.

The Queen of Sheba Visits Solomon. A medieval tale relates that the tree of the Cross survived until Solomon. The King ordered that it be felled and used for a bridge over the river Siloam. Here the Queen of Sheba had a vision and fell to her knees, surrounded by her astonished maids. Piero depicted human form as only a supreme master can. The features of his figures are unmistakable and unforgettable, just as it is impossible to mistake Botticelli's women with those of any other master. Piero's models have oval-shaped heads set on long, blushing necks and full, strongly delineated shoulders. The shape of their heads are accentuated by hair closely molded to the skull. Their faces are naked—all life concentrated in the eyes, features tensed and concentrated. Eyes with almond-shaped lids almost never return a viewer's glance. Piero's art avoids the cheap psychology that makes painting a theater of gestures and grimaces. When he wishes to stage a drama (as here, for the Queen of Sheba is lonely in her mystical vision), he surrounds his heroine with a group of surprised girls. For greater contrast, he adds horses under a tree and two henchmen, simple, shapely boys who prefer hooves and hide to miracles. The time of day is as in other works by Piero: indeterminate, a pink-blue dawn or perhaps noon.

The scene continues, and Piero holds the story in a unified perspective similar to the conventional unity of place in classical theater. Under a Corinthian portico, drawn with an architect's precision, the Queen of Sheba meets Solomon. Two worlds: the feminine court of the Queen, colorful and histrionic; and Solomon's officers, a study of severe political wisdom and gravity. There is the Renaissance variety of dress, but without Pisanello's ornament and detail. Solomon's men stand firmly on the stone floor; their long feet, seen in profile, recall Egyptian painting.

The bridge is dismantled in the next scene. Three workers carry a heavy log as though anticipating Christ's path to Golgotha. Yet this fragment (with the exception of the central

figure) is weighted and painted in a naive manner so that art historians detect the hand of Piero's disciples in it.

The Annunciation is composed with an Albertian architecture of perfect balance and perspective. The austerity of marble accords with the grave tone of the story. A massive God the Father in a cloud with an angel on his left side; and Mary, a calm, sculpted Renaissance figure.

The Dream of Constantine. Piero now leaves the stone porticoes and paints the golden-brown interior of Constantine's tent, one of the first conscious chiaroscuro nocturnes in Italian art. The torches' glow gently models the forms of two guardsmen, with a seated courtier and the sleeping Emperor in the foreground.

Constantine's Victory Over Maxentius evokes both Uccello and Velázquez, though Piero builds his theme with a classical simplicity and loftiness. Even the chaos of the cavalcade is organized. Knowing very well the principle of foreshortening, he never uses it for exclamation, never disturbs the harmony of planes. Raised lances support the morning sky, the landscape rains light.

The Torture of Judas portrays Judas, who was thrown into a dry well by order of Helena, the Emperor's mother, for not divulging the hiding place of the tree of the Cross. The scene depicts two servants lifting a repentant Judas from the well with a pulley attached to triangular scaffolding. Seneschal Boniface holds him tightly by the hair. Though the subject suggests a study of cruelty, Piero speaks in a sober, objective voice. The faces of the dramatis personae are unmoved and void of emotion. If anything appears ominous in the scene, it is the apparatus which binds the convict. Once more geometry has absorbed passion.

The Discovery and Proof of the Cross. The fresco is divided into two sections which form an inseparable thematic and compositional unity. The first shows the excavation of the three crosses by workers, watched by Constantine's mother. A medieval town of spires, slanted roofs, pink and yellow walls sits in the distant valley. In the second section a half-naked man touched by the Cross rises from the dead. The Emperor's

mother and her maids-of-honor worship the scene. The architectural background is like a commentary on the event. It is not the phantom medieval town of the previous scene, but a harmony of marble triangles, squares, and circles: the mature wisdom of the Renaissance. The architecture here has the role of a final, rational verification of the miracle.

Three hundred years after the discovery of the True Cross, the Persian King Chosroes[6] captured Jerusalem and Christianity's most precious relic. In turn, the Persians were defeated by Emperor Heraclius[7]. Piero unfolds the raging battle in a confused knot of men, horses, and war implements which only superficially resembles the famous battles of Uccello. One is struck by the great serenity emanating from Piero's frescoes. Uccello's conflicts are noisy. His copper horses pound with their haunches, the massacre's roar and trampling rises to the sheet-iron sky and falls heavily to earth. In Piero the gestures are slow, solemn. His narration has an epic impassiveness, both sides conduct their bloody rites with the earnestness of lumbermen felling a forest. The sky above the contestants is transparent. In the wind the unfolded banners "bow with their wings lowered, like dragons, lizards, and birds pierced with spears."

Finally, the victorious, barefoot Heraclius carries the Cross to Jerusalem, leading a ceremonial procession of Greek and Armenian priests with their colorful, bizarrely shaped head-dresses. Art historians wonder where Piero could have observed such fantastic costumes. Perhaps they were introduced purely for the sake of composition. With his taste for the monumental, Piero crowns the heads of his heroes like an architect capitalizing columns. Heraclius' procession, the finale of the golden legend, resounds with a pure, dignified note.

Piero's masterpiece has been severely damaged by damp and restorers' incompetence. The colors are faded as though rubbed with flour, and the poor lighting of the organ-loft hinders full contemplation of the frescoes. Yet, if only one legendary figure remained, one tree, one splinter of sky, we

could reconstruct the whole from these scraps, like the fragments of a Greek temple.

Searching for the key to Piero's mystery, some have said he was one of the most impersonal, supra-individual artists in history. Berenson compares him to the anonymous sculptor of the Parthenon, and to Velázquez. His human figures enact the grave drama of demigods, heroes, and giants. The absence of psychological expression unveils the pure artistic movement within mass and light. "Facial expression is so unnecessary and sometimes so embarrassing that I often prefer a statue without a head," confesses Berenson. Malraux welcomes Piero as the inventor of indifference: "His sculptured crowd comes alive only during a sacred dance…which reflects the principle of contemporary sensitivity. Expression should come from the painting not from the depicted forms."

Over the battle of shadows, convulsions, and tumult, Piero has erected *lucidus ordo*—an eternal order of light and balance.

I thought that I might do without Monterchi, a tiny village twenty-five kilometers from Arezzo. A pond of stones overgrown with cypress trees and blue sky—like duckweed. But I was swayed by a friend's letter: "The Monterchi cemetery and chapel are situated on a hill just off the side of the road some hundred meters from the village, where a strange car is a sensational event. It is reached through an avenue of olive trees amid vineyards. The chapel and cemetery caretaker's house stand in line with the tombs and take their pastoral appearance from the luxuriant vines surrounding them. Girls and mothers with children come here for their evening strolls."

Outside the chapel is yellow, inside lime-white; perhaps baroque but really devoid of style. It is minute, with the altar's mensa situated in a niche. There is hardly enough room for a coffin and a few mourners. The walls are bare, with the sole ornament a framed fresco gravely damaged at the sides and bottom. In their journey through the ages, the fresco's angels lost their sandals, and some clumsy restorer tried to replace them.

It is certainly one of the most provocative Madonnas any artist has ever dared to paint. Human, pastoral, and carnal. Her hair, pressed to her skull, leave her large ears uncovered. She has a sensual neck and full arms, a straight nose and a fleshy, determined mouth. Her eyes are lowered, her eyelids drawn over black pupils which stare into her body. She wears a simple, high-waisted dress open from breast to knees. Her left hand rests on a hip, a country bridesmaid's gesture; the right hand touches her belly but without a trace of vulgarity, as though touching a mystery. Piero has painted for the Monterchi peasants what will be through the ages the tender secret of every mother. Two angels briskly draw aside the drapery like a stage curtain.

It was fortunate that Piero was born neither in Florence nor Rome—but in small Borgo San Sepolcro, far from the tumults of history, amid quiet fields and gentle trees. He often and eagerly returned from the great world to his native town, held municipal office and died here.

The Palazzo Municipale retains two works by its greatest son. The polyptych *The Madonna of the Misericordia*, which Focillon considers Piero's first unassisted painting. The upper part depicts the Crucifixion. Christ is painted in a tragic and stern posture; but at the foot of the Cross, Mary and St. John possess an emotive force unusual in Piero's later work. The gestures of their arms and spread fingers portray a violent despair, as if Piero had not yet developed his very own poetics of reserve and silence. But in the main painting, the Madonna shielding the faithful with her robe, the seed of his future style lies. The central figure is tall, strong and impersonal—an elemental form. Her gray-green robe flows like warm rain down upon the heads of the kneeling believers.

The Resurrection of Christ was painted with the sure hand of a forty-year-old man. Christ stands firmly against a melancholy Tuscan landscape. A victorious figure. He holds a banner in his left hand while the other hand clasps the shroud like a senator's toga. He has a wise, wild face with the abyss-like eyes of Dionysus. He rests his foot on the edge of the tomb like someone crushing the neck of an enemy defeated in a duel. In the foreground, four Roman guards are paralyzed by

sleep. The contrast is striking: the sudden awakening against the heavy slumber of men turned into objects. The sky and Christ are accented with light; the guards and the background landscape are full of shadow. Though the figures appear static, Piero with a stroke of genius reconciles disorder and movement, energy and torpidity: the drama of life and death expressed in measures of inertia.

Urbino has been compared to a lady seated on a black throne covered with a green mantle. The lady is a palace dominating the small town just as its owners, the Montefeltro dukes, dominated its history.

They began as robber knights. Dante—an expert on last things—placed one of them, Guido, in an infernal circle where sowers of discord moan. But with time their tempers cooled, and their dispositions became more gentle. Federigo, whose rule began in 1444, was the example of a humanist general. If he engaged in wars, as for instance against the ruthless Malatesta of Rimini who murdered two wives (shown by Piero piously kneeling in front of S. Sigismondo), he did so with an obvious distaste for bloody spectacle. He was both valiant and prudent. Through his condottiere service for the Sforzi, the Aragons, and the Pope, he tripled his domain. He liked to walk alone in the duchy's capital, unguarded (already then a propaganda trick) in simple red robes and talk with his subjects man to man. Though subjects had to kneel and kiss his hand during these friendly chats, Federigo was considered a liberal ruler for his time.

His court, renowned for its unusual moral *sanitas*, was an oasis for humanists. It was the model for Castiglione's *Courtier*. The Duke collected antiques, artists, and scholars. He hosted, employed, or at least maintained close contacts with men like Alberti, the most prominent architect of the age, the sculptor Rossellino[8], and the masters Joos van Gent[9], Piero, and Melozzo da Forli—in[10] whose portrait the Duke sits in his library in full armor (but here the junk metal is only the embellishment of power) holding a huge volume set on a book-rest. A book-lover of the highest standard, Federigo after the Battle of Volterra demanded as ransom not horses, not

gold, but a Hebrew Bible. His library of rare theological and humanistic manuscripts was certainly richer than his armory.

We speak of Federigo da Montefeltro at such length because for many years he was Piero della Francesca's friend and protector, which entitles him to his posthumous fame. Perhaps Piero spent his most enjoyable years here. Vasari, an important source on how many masterpieces were lost, says that Piero painted in Urbino a sequence of small pictures that were greatly to the Duke's liking, though they disappeared during the wars which ravished the land.

Piero's diptych of Federigo and his wife, Battista Sforza, resides not in Urbino but in the Uffizi Gallery in Florence. The contrast between the two figures is striking. Battista's face is waxen, drained of blood (thus the speculation that the portrait was painted after her death), while the Duke's tawny face vibrates with energy: a vulture-like profile—a head with raven-black hair set on a lion's neck and strong torso. A red robe and head-dress. Duke Montefeltro's bust rises like a lone rock against a fantastical, remote, and delicately painted landscape. To span the distance between the figure and the landscape, our gaze must plunge into an abyss without any intermediate planes, without continuity of space and perspective. The figure of the Duke falls into the foreground from an ineffably light sky like a hot meteor.

On the portrait's reverse are two allegorical scenes full of courtly poetry. They depict the triumphal processions popular in Renaissance painting. Surrounded by the four theological virtues, the coach of the Duchess is drawn by two unicorns. The dimmed, ash-gray landscape only brightens at the infinite horizon's line—an evocation of death, no doubt.

The Duke's triumphal coach is drawn by white stallions. Federigo is accompanied by Justice, Strength, and Moderation. A fantastic mountain landscape radiates light. A blue afterglow is reflected in the water's mirror. The allegory's inscription proclaims:

Clarus insigni vehitur triumpho

Quem parem summis ducibus perhennis

Fame virtutem celebrat decenter

Sceptra tenentem

The gallery in Urbino contains two masterpieces from separate periods of Piero's life. *Sinigalia*, named after the church where it previously hung, portrays the Madonna with two angels. Despite a lack of documentation, it is considered one of Piero's last works. Though some see in it signs of an old man's falling-off, it is difficult to agree with that judgment. One rather concurs with those who discover in the work an attempted innovation of style.

The new light came from the North. The *Sinigalia* Madonna best conveys the dramatic encounter between the Italian master's imagination and the power of Van Eyck, to whom Piero had turned in his youth as well. This suspicion of influence is confirmed by a devotion to detail unprecedented in Piero's work. The hands of the angels, Madonna and Child are painted with a typically Flemish love of detail. The whole simple, static scene is placed, not in Renaissance buildings as in the Arezzo frescoes, but in a private interior (an exception for Piero), a fragment of a grayish-blue chamber opening to a corridor on the right side. The corridor's perspective is discontinued; it stops abruptly at a slanted wall with windows through which falls a radiance unnecessary to the lighting of the foreground figures. It is a chiaroscuro study. The human forms are succinct and monumental. The Madonna has the common face of a nurse, the wet-nurse of kings. Little Jesus raises his hand in a lordly gesture and looks straight ahead with a wise, severe gaze—the diminished figure of a future emperor aware of his power and fate.

The Flagellation of Christ surprises the viewer with its completely original treatment of subject and perfect harmony of composition, a synthesis of painting and architecture as yet unseen in European art. We have often repeated the term "monumentality," to indicate the significance of architecture in Piero's work. We must now look more closely at these matters. They transcend the era, for the loss of architectural sense, the

highest art organizing the visible, is the drama of contemporary painting.

The man who influenced Piero more than any living or dead painter (Domenico Veneziano, Sassetta, Van Eyck, his contemporary perspectivists Uccello and Masaccio) was an architect, Leon Battista Alberti.

Born in Genoa in 1404, he came from a prominent Florentine family banished from their native town. The importance of the Albertis can be expressed in a figure: the high price offered to slay a member of the family by the vengeful and victorious Albizzis. Leon Battista received a truly Renaissance education in Bologna while living in student poverty after his father's death. He took his doctorate in law but also studied the Greeks, mathematics, music, and architecture, which were complemented by the travels he undertook as an associate of the Pope. His fortunes changed frequently, only improving when his humanist friend, Tommaso da Sarzana, became Pope Nicolas V. Alberti was praised equally for his looks and his intellectual virtues, he was a model of a Renaissance athlete and encyclopedist, "a man of outstanding mind, acute judgment and thorough knowledge." This is how Angelo Poliziano[11] introduced him to Lorenzo de Medici: "Neither the oldest books nor the most unusual skills are unknown to this man. You can only wonder whether he is more gifted in rhetoric or poetry, whether his style is more solemn or elegant. He has studied the remains of ancient buildings so thoroughly that he has mastered the ancient way of building while imparting these methods to his contemporaries. He has invented machines and automatons, and also constructed beautiful buildings; besides that, he is considered an outstanding painter and sculptor." His last years (he died in Rome in 1472) were irradiated with fame. People compared him to Socrates. He was a friend of mighty families like the Gonzagas and Medicis.

He left nearly fifty works: studies, dissertations, dialogues, and moral treatises, not counting letters and apocryphal writings. His lasting fame rests upon his works on sculpture, painting, and architecture. His main treatise, *De Re Aedificatoria*, is by no means a manual for engineers (even to

the degree that Vitrivius's treatise is) but a charming, learned book for art patrons and humanists. Despite its classical structure, technical subjects are mixed with anecdotes and seemingly trivial subjects. We read about foundations, building-sites, bricklaying, doorknobs, wheels, axes, levers, picks, and "how to exterminate and destroy snakes, mosquitoes, bed-bugs, flies, fleas, mice, moths and other importunate creatures of the night." Alberti's treatise on painting, written in 1436, directly influenced Piero. In the introduction, the author warns that he will not tell stories about painters but instead wishes to construct the art of painting *ab ovo*.

It is often claimed that Renaissance artists were satisfied with mere imitation of classical styles and nature. Alberti's writings demonstrate that matters were not as simple as encyclopedias and textbooks make out. He says that the artist, even more than the philosopher, is the architect of the world. Though he may borrow from certain natural relationships, proportions, and laws, his discovery is through vision rather than mathematical speculation. "What cannot be perceived by the eye is without interest to the painter." The eye's image is a combination of rays which run like threads from the object to the viewer, constructing a pyramid. Painting cuts through this visual pyramid.

The result is a definite chain of operations based upon the logic of sight. One must first locate the object in space and then describe it with a linear contour. Then one perceives an array of object surfaces that must be harmonized, and this is called the art of composition by means of color.

Differences in color issue from differences in lighting. Before Alberti, painters played with color. (Renaissance theoreticians often sneered at the chromatic chaos of the Middle Ages.) After him, they played with light. The stress placed upon color makes it impossible to delineate form with a sharp contour. Piero understood this lesson very well and he developed it in his own way. He concentrates on an object's inner space rather than its outline. Seth's nakedness or the Queen of Sheba's head are surrounded by luminescent lining

like the edges of clouds. This bright contour is Alberti's theory in practical application.

Composition is a method that unifies objects and space in a painting. The narration can be reduced to figures, figures dismembered into elements, elements into surfaces adjoining one another like the facets of a diamond. However, this should not lead to a geometrical coldness. Venturi has observed that Piero's composition, his forms, aspire to geometry without entering Plato's paradise of cones, spheres, and cubes. He is, if one may use such an anachronism, like a figurative painter who has passed through a cubist phase.

Alberti devotes a lot of space to narrative painting, but he declares that a painting should act by itself and enchant the spectator regardless of whether he understands the story being told. Emotion should be released through the movements of bodies or forms rather than facial expressions. He warns against excessive tumult, overloading with ornament and detail. From this warning Piero drew the two rules governing his most outstanding compositions: the principle of a harmonizing background and that of tranquility.

In Piero's best paintings (the *Nativity*, the portrait of the Duke of Urbino, the *Baptism, Constantine's Victory*) the remote, absorbent background is as significant as the figures. The contrast between the massive human figures (usually seen from below) and the delicate landscape underlines and attenuates the drama of man in space. The landscapes are usually deserted, inhabited only by the elements, water, earth, and light. The quiet chant of the air and the immense planes are like a choir against which Piero's deanatic personae remain silent.

The principle of tranquility does not lie merely in architectural balance. It is a principle of inner order. Piero understood that excess movement and expression both destroy the visual painted space and compress the painting's time to a momentary scene, a flash of existence. His stoic heroes are constrained and impassive. The stilled leaves, the hue of the first earthly dawn, the unstruck hour, give the things Piero created an ontological indestructability.

Let us return to *The Flagellation*. It is Piero's most Albertian work. The compositional threads are cool, taut, and balanced. Each person stands in a rationally built space like a block of ice. At first glance it seems the demon of perspective holds absolute sway here.

The scene is divided into two parts. The main drama occurs on the left side under a marble portico supported by Corinthian columns where pure intelligence could walk. The rectangular floor tiles guide our sight toward the half-naked Christ. He leans against a column on which rests the stone statue of a Greek hero with a raised hand. Two henchmen simultaneously lift their switches. Their strokes will be regular and indifferent like the ticking of a clock. The silence is complete, without the victim's moans or the executioners' loathsome panting. There are two more figures of observers: one turned away from the viewer, the other seated in profile on the left. Were only this section to remain, it would be a box scene—a model sealed in glass, tamed reality. Knowing that geometry devours passion, Piero never placed important events in perspective (unlike the ironist Breughel, *vide The Death of Icarus*). The significant figures in his dramas stand in the foreground as if right in the footlights. So the picture's symbolic meaning has been associated with the three men standing in the foreground on the right with their backs turned to the martyr.

Berenson and Malraux were interested only in their compositional function. "In order to make this scene even more severe and cruelly impersonal, the artist introduced three magnificent forms which stand in the foreground like eternal rocks." But tradition connects this work to a contemporary historical event: the violent death of Duke Oddantonio da Montefeltro[12], here flanked by two conspirators. Behind their backs, a murderous intention is realized, symbolized by the scene of flagellation. Suarez gives rein to his imagination and plunges into risky explication: the three mysterious men are the high priest of the Temple of Jerusalem, the Roman proconsul, and a Pharisee. Backs turned to the event so momentous in world history, they nevertheless weigh its significance and consequences. In their encoded faces Suarez sees three different states: the pharisee's restrained hatred, the

Roman bureaucrat's stubborn righteousness, and the priest's cynical serenity. But whatever key we may use, *The Flagellation* will remain one of the world's most uninterpretable paintings. We view it through a thin pane of ice—chained, fascinated, and helpless as in a dream.

The Madonna and Child surrounded with saints and angels is claimed by students of the thorny chronology of Piero's works to be his last painting. Though its authorship was long the subject of controversy, it was finally attributed to Piero and now hangs in Milan's Brera Gallery. Ten figures surround the Madonna in a half-circle, ten columns of flesh and blood, with the rhythm repeated in the background architecture. The scene is situated in an apse with a full arch and a shell-shaped vault opening overhead. From the top of the shell an egg hangs on a thin line. This may seem a trivial description but the unexpected, formal element is amazingly logical and apt. The painting is Piero's testament. And an egg, as we know, used to be a symbol for the secret of life. Under the mature vault of its architecture, this unmoving pendulum on a straight line will strike for Piero della Francesca the hour of immortality.

Was the greatness of his art as obvious to his contemporaries and descendants as it is clear to us? Piero was certainly a valued and much-invited artist. However, he worked very slowly and did not have the dazzling career of his colleagues in Florence. And he was praised mainly for his two theoretical works, written toward the end of his life. It comes as no surprise that he was quoted more frequently by architects than by painters or poets. Cillenio[13] does devote one sonnet to Piero; Giovanni Santi, Raphael's father, mentions him in his rhymed chronicle; another poet alludes to the portrait of Federigo da Montefeltro in a long poem. There's not much.

Vasari, born nineteen years after Piero's death, adds only a few biographical details. He stresses his expression, realism, and passion for detail, which is a clear misunderstanding. Later, chroniclers and art historians issue a dispassionate drone of quotations from his work.

In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Piero's fame subsided. His name was buried in the sand of oblivion, no

doubt because the itinerary of art pilgrimages proceeded from Florence to Rome leaving aside Arezzo, not to mention tiny Borgo San Sepolcro. No one knows whether the large quantity of wine consumed or the taste of the epoch was responsible for the unfavorable mention in *Italienische Forschungen* by the philologist and aesthete von Rumohr, who says that it was not worth concerning oneself with the painter called Piero della Francesca. The rehabilitation of Piero, erased from the register of the greats by blind history, did not come until the middle of the nineteenth century. Stendhal (not the first case in which a writer precedes the discoveries of art historians) saved him from oblivion. He compared him to Uccello and stressed his masterful perspective, his synthesis of architecture and painting; but as if swayed by Vasari's judgment, he says: "*Toute la beauté est dans l'expression*." Piero's place amongst the greatest European painters was restored by Crowe and Cavalcaselle in their *History of Painting in Italy*, published in England in the years 1864–66. Later, the studies start to flow, from Berenson to Roberto Longhi, Piero's exquisite monographist. Malraux says that the present century has rendered justice to four artists: Georges de la Tour, Vermeer, El Greco, and Piero.

What do we know about his life? Nothing or almost nothing. Even the date of his birth is uncertain (1410–1420?). He was the son of the artisan Benedetto di Franceschi and Romana di Perino of Monterchi. His art academy was Domenico Veneziano's studio in Florence though he did not remain there long. He probably felt most at home in his little Borgo San Sepolcro. He worked consecutively in Ferrara, Rimini, Rome, Arezzo, and Urbino. In 1450 he fled from the plague to Bastia; in Rimini he bought a house with a garden; in 1486 he made up a will which bears his signature. He passed on his experience not only to his disciples, for he left two theoretical treatises: *De Quinque Corporibus Regularibus* and *De Prospettiva Pingendi*, in which he discussed optics and perspective in a precise, scientific manner. He died on October 12, 1492.

It is impossible to place him in a romance. He is so thoroughly hidden behind his paintings and frescoes that it

seems wrong to guess at his private life, his loves and friendships, ambitions, anger and sorrow. He has received the greatest act of mercy by absent-minded history, which mislays documents and blurs all traces of life. If he endures, it is not through anecdotes of the miseries of his life, his madness, his successes and failures. His entire being is in his oeuvre.

I imagine him walking along a narrow San Sepolcro street towards the town gate, with only the cemetery and the Umbrian hills beyond. He wears a gray robe thrown over his broad shoulders. He is short, stocky, strolling with a peasant's assurance. He silently returns salutations.

Tradition holds that he went blind towards the end of his life. One Marco di Longara told Berto degli Alberti that as a young boy he walked the streets of Borgo San Sepolcro with an old, blind painter called Piero della Francesca.

Little Marco could not have known that his hand was leading light.

MEMORIES OF VALOIS

Adieu Paris[1]*. Nous cherchons l'amour, le bonheur, l'innocence.*

Nous ne serons jamais assez loin de toi.

I DO NOT KNOW why Poles, a naturally mobile nation and one already encouraged by history to excessive dislocation, come to Paris and fall into a kind of trance. The city is unquestionably beautiful, but one is inclined to agree with those who say the true France is moving more and more beyond its gates.

After the traditional excursions to Chartres and Versailles, it is therefore worth visiting the lesser known charming towns and villages scattered within a hundred kilometers of the capital—M. Hulot's auto can reach them in an hour and a half. The chain of the finest Gothic cathedrals: Morienval or St. Loup-du-Naud for those who want to know what the Romanesque is without traveling to Burgundy or Provence; the ruins of Les Andelys; the palaces of Compiègne, Fontainebleau, Rambouillet; and the forests, the wonderful forests where one can still hear the bugle of history.

North of Paris—Valois—the oldest France. The heritage of Clovis[2], the little king of the Franks. With time it became the country's most prized domain. Twice ruled by the king's brothers; twice by princes of Valois. The land where, as a poet said, the heart of France has been beating for more than a thousand years.

Chantilly

CHANTILLY LIES AMONG FORESTS near the Nonette, a river named like a girl from a fairy-tale. A well-fed town with a palace, upper-class villas, and a famous race-course. I am here for the third time. This time to visit Sassetta. One must cross the entire town to see him.

The houses are clean and rich. They glitter like a copper nameplate, the token of a notary's affluence. The hour is early. The shutters are closed, the wicket-gates shut, the gardens divided neatly and jealously by fences, like feudal duchies. Over a low wall, I catch sight of a vassal in blue trousers mowing the lawn of a local worthy.

The most frequently met word here is the adjective "private": a private road, private property, private wells, private passage, private meadow. On a carefully mown meadow protected by a fence, a scene from Dégas: four couples on horseback, practicing complicated figures in the rhythm of a waltz. No, they are not a circus troupe: Their performance is more dignified and thus quite dull: in pairs, then single file, a lady to the right, a man to the left, then a circle. But what can I know of these pleasures, when my only pitiful contact with a horse's back lasted a few minutes and that, God help me, at a folk festival. In any event, it seemed that I had brushed up against a distant epoch before reaching the palace of Chantilly.

On the way one must pass the Great Stables, a masterpiece of eighteenth-century architecture in the style of Louis XV. A huge, hoof-shaped building which in the good old days held two hundred and forty horses and four hundred and twenty hunting hounds, not counting the army of stable boys, equerries, dog-keepers, and veterinary surgeons. After the stables, the palace is much less impressive. Erected in the "Renaissance style" it has an added "Gothic" chapel whose fakeness can be felt from a distance.

Two thousand years ago Chantilly was the site of *Cantilius*, a Gallo-Roman stronghold. In the Middle Ages, it was the home of the *bouteiller de France* who went from master of the royal cellars to advisor to the king. In the fourteenth century,

Chancellor Orgemont built a castle here, which through marriages fell to the barons of Montmorency, who were warlords and councilors related to the royal family. One member, Anne de Montmorency[3], thrust his way into history —a magnificent figure of a knight, diplomat, and councilor to five consecutive French kings, from Louis XII to Charles IX. He possessed more than a hundred castles, an astronomical fortune, immense political influence, and an indestructible body; at the age of seventy-five in battle against the Protestants at Saint-Denis, it took five sword wounds, two blows on the head from a battle-axe, and a harquebus shot to bring him down, and falling, he broke the pommel of his sword with his jaw.

Chantilly occupies an important niche in France's sentimental history as the scene of the last great love of Vert-Galant, that is to say Henry IV. He fell in love with Caroline de Montmorency, the daughter of his friend and host. The beautiful girl was Lolita's age, His Grace was fifty-four. Being a shrewd politician, he matched Caroline with Henry II Bourbon-Condé, who was timid, clumsy, and dim-witted. In a word, the antithesis of Vert-Galant. Though the intrigue was transparent. However, fate was capricious, the young couple escaped from Chantilly to hide in Brussels, under the protection of the King of Spain. Henry IV raged, to the point of asking the Pope's assistance in this rather worldly matter. Not long after that, Ravaillac's[4] stiletto pacified the royal heart.

Though the present palace is a poor imitation, its surroundings compensate for its architectural faults: the park, the wood, the wide, green moat filled with voracious carp whose eternally open mouths would whet even an ascetic's appetite. France cannot boast an abundance of gastronomic ascetics, it is true, and Chantilly is associated with Vatel who entered the hagiography of gluttons and gourmands. It all began on April 23, 1671, when King Louis XIV and his court visited the great Condé's residence at Chantilly. The immense retinue—five thousand people—required an army of servants and cooks. They were commanded by a "*contrôleur général de la Bouche de Monsieur le Prince*" named Vatel. After a

smooth start, one day two of the sixty tables ran short of roast meats. Vatel could not bear the humiliation and stabbed himself with his sword. Madame de Sévigné tells the story with taste and emotion.

The Chantilly Gallery can match the Louvre, though the schools and epochs are so mixed up that it is hard to make sense of them at first glance. To add to that, the collector-princes (out of sheer distraction, one presumes) inserted unbelievable nineteenth-century duds among the masterpieces. However, without this collection our knowledge of French painting, especially the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, would be incomplete. Let us only mention the portraits of Corneille de Lyon[5], a rich collection of drawings and paintings by Jean and Francois Clouet[6], Étienne Chevalier's *Book of Hours* illustrated by Jean Fouquet[7], and one of the world's most magnificent illustrated manuscripts, *Les très riches heures du Duc de Berry*.

To view and really take in miniature paintings requires a special disposition and ability. One must enter a world hermetically sealed like a glass sphere. Our situation resembles Alice's in Wonderland, who opens a door with a golden key and sees the most beautiful garden, though it is too small to enter. "Oh, if one could fold oneself up like a telescope." Looking at miniatures is for those who can fold themselves up.

History preserved only the first names of the manuscript's illuminators: Pol, Jean and Herman. We know that they came from Limbourg, that is from Flanders, which in the fifteenth century belonged to the powerful, art-loving Burgundy princes.

We have said that *Les très riches heures* are miniatures, which is accurate in the way of a cataloguer's phrase, but in artistic respects matters are quite different. We touch upon the point at which painting leaves the pages of manuscripts, and gives birth to canvases. For this to happen it is not enough to tear a page from a book and hang it on the wall. The gesture must be preceded by the miniature's inner evolution. Color must acquire the intensity to express the material mutability of

the world. The image must radiate its own light independent of surroundings and finally, attain definite boundaries and depth. In a word, it must grow into an ontological body, leave the level of simple beings and reach the level of complex structures. The Limbourg brothers' miniatures foreshadow the breakthrough. The linear perspective is naive and awkward in a charming way, but the space built with color is so convincing that our sight steps into the depths of the image without stumbling.

July. Sheep-shearing in a lush green foreground. Our gaze travels over a yellow oblong of grain; a jump across the river and we hit the hard, pearly wall of a castle with its deep-blue roof. Beyond the cone-shaped mountains and golden hills—the blue eye of infinity.

The landscape is a partner, a character in a genre scene, not a decoration. The Limbourg brothers' love of detail is striking. Tillage under the signs of Scorpio and Libra. Neatly divided ridges woven like little braids. In the furrows, crows pecking for seeds. Yet the picture is no larger than a hand and a castle and its towers had to be fitted in, the seeds and worms have not been represented, which undoubtedly troubled the painter's, as his hunger for truth was truly Flemish.

But Sassetta, where is Sassetta, I came here for Sassetta. What a pleasure to find one's "own" painting in the right place. It is small, almost totally smothered by the surrounding canvases. It is titled *The Betrothal of St. Francis to Poverty.* Two monks (St. Francis can be recognized by his aureole) face three slender girls: in gray, green, and purple. There is a subtle movement like the spinning of a delicate thread between the hands of the saint and the middle figure. Above left, the three mystical maidens calmly fly away with only the backward bend of their feet, like bird's legs, conveying their flight. A white stone castle to the right is so light that a butterfly could capture it. The Tuscan landscape—gray and green, as evening approaches. Tree-tops are placed separately in the landscape, like notes. The sky falls in streaks, as in oriental paintings—cool blue at the top with a weightless, limitless luminescence hovering above the gently modulated hills.

If a work is to be judged by the extent to which it "moves art forward," Sassetta's painting is scandalously anachronistic and a proof of his blindness to what is "new." He lives in the middle of the Quattrocento, yet he paints as if it were the thirteenth century. He builds a human body of vegetable fibre, not flesh and bones, as behooves the age of Masaccio and Donatello. His contempt for the laws of gravitation is complete; and his tender, linear composition places him closer to the Byzantines than any Florentine or Venetian painter. Yet it is difficult to tear oneself away from Sassetta, whose paintings radiate an irresistable charm, without redefining our vision. Fortunately, art history differs from a geometry textbook and can accommodate artists of charm: Sano di Pietro from Siena, Baldovinetti from Florence or the Venetian Carpaccio.

Huge stairs descend from the palace to a logical French garden encircled by the Avenue of Philosophers where the prince's guests once walked: Bossuet (his speech at the great Condé's funeral is still a student's nightmare, but what magnificent oratory!), Fénelon, Bourdaloue[8], La Bruyère (teacher of the prince's grandson), Molière (he owed the production of *Tartuffe* to the prince's patronage), Boileau, Racine, La Fontaine, and the ladies, de La Fayette and de Sévigné—in a word, an anthology of seventeenth-century French literature. Beyond the Avenue of Philosophers, an exuberant English garden with winding paths, thick bushes—a distinct lack of veneration for the classical rules—with delightful cascades, islands of love, and miniature villages with mills and cottages in which the elegant company disguised as peasants ate sumptuous meals.

As the Senlis bus enters the forest, one may glimpse the palace in the green frame of the water's reflection. It appears suddenly, as though lit by lightning.

Senlis

Who invented that abyss and cast it upwards?

JULIAN PRZYBOS[9]

> Tomorrow, the archers of Senlis must give back the bouquet to those of Loisy.
>
> *SYLVIE*[10], GERARDDE NERVAL

HISTORY HAS PASSED THROUGH Senlis. It lived within its walls for a few centuries, then departed. What remains is an arena overgrown with grass, a broken circle of Gallo-Roman walls besieged by vine, bits of a royal palace, the Abbey of St. Victor converted to a noisy dormitory, and a cathedral, one of the oldest cathedrals in the great Île-de-France Gothic chain.

Yet Senlis is not a sad town, not a desperately sad town like a crown excavated from a tomb. It is an old, silver coin with the image of a once harsh emperor, which you can now safely turn in your fingers like a nut. It stands on a small hill in the company of eternal forests encircled by the Nonette.

We have said that Senlis Cathedral is one of the oldest Gothic cathedrals. This requires further explanation since in this area chronologies are misleading. The initiator of the Gothic—if one may call him that—was Suger, a minister and royal regent of France. When appointed abbot of the coronation cathedral of Saint-Denis (now in a working class Paris suburb and blackened by factory smoke), he began reconstruction of the old Carolingian church by widening its portals and organ-loft and raising the vault. This was the first use of ogive and cross-ribbed vaulting, which for some scholars is the essence of the Gothic style. On January 19, 1143, a powerful hurricane passed over the town, ripping up trees and toppling houses. Though still under construction, the cathedral remained intact. The pious considered it a miracle; the architects, proof of the sturdiness of the new type of vault. A new epoch in the history of architecture commenced.

It is a matter of debate whether the arches which form an X in the cross-ribbed vault (its invention wrongly attributed to the cathedral builders) are as structurally significant as Viollet-

le-Duc, Choisy, and Lasterrie deemed. A revolutionary hypothesis that this vaulting was mere ornament was prompted by more recent research by the engineer Sabouret and the architect Pol Abraham, who studied the cathedrals bombed in 1914 and tested the resistance of the old materials in laboratories. The problem is not so simple as it might appear. Moreover, the aesthetic-minded historians of architecture stress style—the Gothic's completely new system of proportions—rather than construction.

A popular view holds that a new style appears in art when the old withers. This botanical theory does not hold when we consider the sequence of Romanesque and Gothic. When the Gothic appeared in the middle of the twelfth century, the Romanesque did not bear any marks of decline. Its displacement was not motivated by the desire to build larger churches since Vézelay Cathedral is nearly as large as Notre-Dame. The general layout of cathedrals also remained almost unchanged. Some historians connect the birth of Gothic with the political expansion of the Capetians, the struggle between the spirits of the North and South that culminated in the bloody crusade against the Albigensians. It is beyond any doubt that the emergence of the Gothic accorded with a new spiritual attitude. The compact, contemplative Romanesque cathedrals were opposed by dynamic, violent edifices in which light, "the divine essence," began to play a dominant role. This coincided with Suger's love of splendor, the opulence of interiors and stained glass—those constellations of precious stones revealed by a thousand burning candles.

Suger is a vivid, fascinating figure. A servant's son, friend of kings, politician, organizer and builder—he hides powerful passions under his religious habit. Many were offended by his insatiable love of luxury. When he writes about gold, crystals, amethysts, rubies, and emeralds—unexpected presents from three abbots for the inlay of his crucifix—one feels that his eyes burn with a very mundane glow. Modesty was not among his virtues. He ordered the abbey's treasury to set aside funds for his funeral celebrations, previously a royal privilege. He had thirteen inscriptions placed in the cathedral to praise his merits. We see him in stained glass at Our Lady's feet, his legs

piously bent but his hands active. Moreover, his name is written as large as the Virgin's.

Suger was a refined writer with a brilliant mind. His connection with neo-Platonic philosophy is indisputable. His conduct scandalized St. Bernard of Clairvaux, a member of the stern Cistercian branch of the Benedictines. The dispute between these two church powers is as fascinating as the controversy between the classicists and the romantics.

However, the reconstruction of the abbey of Saint-Denis was not solely a matter of Suger's personal ambition and taste; it was a necessity. With the vividness of a nineteenth-century writer, he describes a religious feast day in the basilica:

"One could often see a most outrageous sight: the backward pressure of the thick human mass against those who were still trying to enter to pay homage and kiss the holy relics, the Nail and Crown of Our Lord, was so great that none of the thousands of people could move a leg for the unusual compression of bodies. They could do nothing but stay immobilized like marble statues or raise a cry. The terror of the women was great and unbearable; suffocating in the mass of strong men, squeezed as in a press, their faces were like bloodless emblems of death; they cried out terribly as if in labor; some were trampled mercilessly, others were carried on the heads of men who helped them out of pity; many barely managed to escape into the monastery garden where they gasped for air, abandoning their aim. Sometimes the brothers who had been showing the tokens of Our Lord's passion to the faithful, irked by their rage and quarreling, could do nothing but escape through the window with the relics."

The consecration of Saint-Denis' new organ-loft commenced on the second Sunday of June, 1144. It was not only Suger's great day, but also a milestone in the history of architecture. The celebration was attended by King Louis VII and his Queen, peers, archbishops, and bishops. The latter were surely unable to sleep peacefully when they had returned to their gloomy churches at Chartres, Soissons, Reims, Beauvais, or Senlis.

As early as 1153, Bishop Thibault of Senlis received a royal letter of recommendation for a new church, urging money collectors to travel throughout France for contributions. The construction was slow, and its consecration in 1191 was held before the work was completed.

In the middle of the thirteenth century a transverse nave was added, and the southern tower was topped with a magnificent spire. It is the most beautiful part of the cathedral. The flight of the eighty-meter tower is breathtaking. The façade is slender, austere, and bare. The Senlis spire sways in the clouds like a tree. The anonymous architects have touched on the mystery of organic architecture.

A fire opened the path to regrettable restoration. The southern façade contrasts with the face of the cathedral. It is entwined with the tangled lines of flamboyant Gothic. Nothing can compete with the simple architecture of the thirteenth century; the capricious airs of the sixteenth century foretell a lethal exhaustion.

Three portals lead inside. The two side tympanums carry a rare architectural motif (columns and arches, or abstraction, not narration) while the one above the main entrance opens a new epoch in the history of iconography. In Senlis the theme of the Virgin Mary is introduced for the first time in place of the Romanesque “Last Judgment” (Christ in majesty and a crowd of Apostles and saints), with the saved flying heavily into the sky as the damned are thrown into the abyss. The Mary theme was continued in Chartres, Notre-Dame de Paris, in Reims, and other cathedrals. The Virgin’s sudden appearance in monumental Gothic sculpture seems a response to the love poetry of the troubadours, the praise of women, and the concept of courtly love which the Church wished to sublimate.

The death, resurrection, and triumph of Mary is told with a powerful simplicity. The “Resurrection” is the most beautiful. Six angels lift Mary from her bed wrapped in a rough-textured cocoon. The angels are full-cheeked, young. They fulfill their duty with earnestness and flair, as though they had school satchels on their backs instead of wings.

The call of the Gothic is as irresistible as the call of mountains. One cannot remain a passive observer for long. These are not Romanesque cathedrals, where from barrel-shaped vaults drops of consolation fall. A Gothic cathedral relates not only to eyes but also to muscles. Dizziness combines with aesthetic perception.

I start to climb the tower. At first, several rough steps form a stony path, but soon I enter the triforum's wide platform which appears to have been smitten by a stone avalanche: a disorder of masks, gargoyles, and the severed heads of saints. A glance down and then up. I am midway between the stone vault and the floor of the nave.

Further climbing is more difficult. The steps are obliterated, and one must search for hand-holds. Finally, I reach another platform, a narrow gallery just above the main portal. On both sides there are two summits—towers with slender, spiral peaks. In back a roof covering the main nave like a shanty made of spruce trees.

Eight centuries have turned the cathedral into a creature close to nature. Patches of lichen, grass between the stones, and bright yellow flowers spring from the curves. A cathedral is like a mountain; no later style, neither Renaissance nor Classic, could retain this symbiosis between architecture and vegetation. The Gothic is natural.

And there are animals here, too! From behind a ledge a huge lizard watches me with its protuding golden eyes. Monsters with dog-heads warm in the sun on inaccessible rock shoulders. For the moment the menagerie is asleep. But some day (perhaps it will be Judgment Day) they will descend the stone stairs and enter the town.

The little gallery is decorated with four figures: Adam, Eve, and two saints with the charm of folk sculptures. Eve is especially beautiful. Coarse-grained, big-eyed, and plump. A heavy plait of hair falls on her wide, supple back.

Time to be on my way. The end of an easy approach and the beginning of the ascent to the summit. It is a vertical crevasse. Sometimes I walk blindly in total darkness, clinging

with both hands to the wall; sometimes the steps become loose stones. I must stop at shorter intervals to steady my breath. The rock wall is split in places by small windows that let in sudden, blinding flashes. Through a crack in the darkness one can see clouds and sky. I am high in a stone gorge which opens to an infinite expanse.

The stairs end. In front of me there is a wall on which I must find a grip. If it were more slanted, it would be a typical overhang. I climb vertically, fighting for balance with my entire body. Finally an open platform—the end of the ascent. Blood pounds in my temples. I cling to a small stone niche. Below, a fall of a few dozen meters. Distant fields breathe gently. They float up to my eyes like solace.

"With a trowel in his hand, the mason Abraham Knupfer sings, hanging in the air on scaffolding so high that, reading Gothic poems on a huge bell, he has at his feet a church of thirty lofty arches and a town of thirty churches.

He sees the stone gargoyles spew torrents of slate down the intricate chasm of galleries, windows, balconies, bell-towers, spires, roofs, and wooden binders dragging a gray stain, the plucked, limp wing of a hawk."

The descent is long, like the descent to hell. Finally, one steps into a narrow street, with folded wings and the memory of flight.

Opposite the cathedral are the remains of a royal palace resting on powerful Gallo-Roman walls. The palace was often visited by the monarchs of the first two dynasties, until their tastes changed and they moved to Compiègne and Fontainebleau. Stone lies upon stone, like geological strata: the remains of a Roman column, traces of Merovingian buildings, Romanesque and Gothic arches.

Nearby is the Musée de la Vénerie (the Hunting Museum), which the guide praises as unique in Europe and urges me not to miss. In fact, it is a miserable store of trumpets, horns, stuffed game, hoofs nailed to wooden boards with braids of skin, along with portraits of princes, viscounts, and dogs. All quite methodically arranged to reflect the complete field of

knowledge of hunting; as for example in a sequence of drawings depicting various falls from a horse—on the head, on the back, etcetera—and the stages of deer hunting. I learned that the beautiful word *halali* simply means dispatching a wounded animal. Further on there is a museum of archaeology and sculpture in a charming mansion, to which you descend along winding lanes.

The Halatte Forest in the vicinity was a kind of holy health resort in Roman times. Stone people on votive offerings raise their stone shirts to expose their pudenda. I do not know if these bas-reliefs have been scrutinized by historians of science, above all medicine; but truly they offer terrific research material. In the Dijon stone collection there are stone lungs presented to the gods by some ancient consumptive. At first glance the sculpted heads look like the heads of the healed. One must stoop and take a closer look. Yes. They are the faces of idiots, melancholics, imbeciles—and the sculptor (a stonemason rather than an artist) defined the malady with a psychiatrist's touch.

On the second floor of the museum, our attention is drawn by a monumental Gothic sculpture of a "lunatic's head." It probably came from the cathedral, occupying a place close to the reptiles on the ladder of Creation. He is not a madman, rather a gentle half-wit, the town fool who wears a red cap and squawks like a cock. His eyes are empty egg-shells, his lips open in an apologetic smile. Beside him rests a "prophet's head," a masterpiece of early Gothic sculpture, a study in noble wisdom and human dignity. The Gothic sculptors were conscious of the range of humanity.

I pocket both notebook and sketchpad. It's time for the most pleasant item on the schedule—loafing around,

wandering aimlessly, according to perspectives, not guidebooks,

looking around exotic workshops and stores: the locksmith's, a travel office, the undertaker's,

staring,

picking up pebbles,

throwing them away,

drinking wine in the darkest spots: Chez Jean, Petit Vatel,

meeting people,

smiling at girls,

putting your face to walls to catch their smells,

asking conventional questions to make sure the well of human benevolence has not dried up,

viewing people ironically, but with love,

joining a dice game,

visiting an antique shop and asking the price of an ebony music box,

listening to its melody, then leaving without it,

studying the menus usually hung in the windows of exclusive restaurants and

indulging in licentious fantasies: lobster or oysters for starters; ending up at Au Bon Coin whose proprietress is kind, has a weak heart, and treats you to a liquor called “Ricard” which has a terrible aniseed taste and can be swallowed only in deference to the natives, careful reading of the festival’s programme and the list of prizes to be won in tombola for the soldiers,

and all the other notices, especially those written by hand.

A shadow travels across the sundial. In the thick autumn air Senlis sleeps like a pond under a blanket of duckweed.

One must move on. Walking towards the station I pass the old churches of Saint-Pierre and Saint-Frambourg, dating from the turn of the eleventh and twelfth centuries. Now they are closed.

The former contains a market, the latter a garage. The French are a rich nation.

Chaâlis

> This old, lonely dwelling of the emperors presents nothing extraordinary besides the ruins of a monastery with Byzantine arcades whose last row is reflected in the mirror of ponds.
>
> *SYLVIE*

A RAMSHACKLE BUS TO Chaâlis leaves from the Senlis station near the war memorial, a masterpiece of exalted ugliness. Down this road rattled the carriage carrying Gerard de Nerval and Sylvie's brother to the last performance in which the poet would see Adrienne, disguised as an angel.

In the literary geography of French Romanticism, Valois occupies a position similar to that of Scotland for the English. It is to the environs of Valois that Gerard de Nerval devoted his *Sylvie*, written two years before his death when the lights of the Orient were dimming and after a period of enthusiasm and love the writer entered a time of despair. The circle of his travels narrowed to the environs of Paris—small, forsaken towns, hamlets as poor as pigeon-houses, where behind green shutters framed by a rose bush and vine a warbler's cage gently swung. Nothing can be more soothing than a provincial night. "Under the Image of St. John" in a room with ancient upholstery trimmings and pier-glass. In the evenings girls in white sang and wove garlands in the meadow, and at night bannered boats carried the young to Cythera. In the humid forests of Valois, among the cloistered ruins and castles, "Werther without pistols" hunted chimeras.

Painters and Romantic poets praised the abbey's ruins to the skies. It is a pity that so little has survived, since the Chaâlis church was one of the first Cistercian Gothic buildings. Its size was impressive, eighty-one meters by twenty-seven, with both wings of the grand transept ending in five radial chapels. The stems of the columns remain with their capitals as pure as musical notes. The abbey is like a deserted nest under the sky's high vault. Liberated from the stone weight the strong arches, buttresses, and pilasters resist the pressure of infinity.

To the immediate left stands a fifteenth-century palace built by Jean Aubert, architect of the great Chantilly stables. It houses the Jacquemart-André collection. A family of great artistic merit who owned the palace and a collection in a Parisian mansion on Boulevard Haussmann (now a splendid museum). A painter with aristocratic connections told me about a dinner party at the time the museum was still a private residence at which the lady of the house reproached her husband for keeping "that terrible Titian" in the dining room.

The Chaâlis collection cannot match its Parisian counterpart. It is typical bric-à-brac, charming, yet slightly unsettling: an ancient bust of the eighteenth-century, Dutch still-lives heavy as cooking odors, vases, barometers, a screen with monkeys, samovars, a copy of the Great Mogul's throne, and a Giotto. I disliked the Giotto at first sight. Two dry, conventional *panneaux*, their color dimmed. I confessed my doubts to a museum guard in a navy-blue uniform with silver buttons. He stood against the wall, as they do, living the mysterious life of a half-object, half-human. He slowly lifted his serpent's lids, listened to my remarks, and then hissed that the Musée Jacquemart-André held no forgeries. It never had, it does not, nor will it ever. I left him at the wall. When he withers completely, he will be replaced by a pole-axe or a chair.

Two small rooms on the second floor display Jean-Jacques Rousseau memorabilia. A few imaginary portraits, one depicting a youth sleeping on a park bench ("J.J. sans argent[11], sans asile, à Lyon et pourtant sans souci sur l'avenir, passe souvent la nuit à la belle étoile," reads the note). A slightly soiled collar in the showcase gives unfavorable evidence of his lady companion, already so loathed by his biographers. A hat, a pen, and the armchair in which the author of the *Confessions* expired. The armchair is conjectural. But since no counter-chair has emerged, it is justly an object of veneration. On the wall an engraving portrays Rousseau's last moments with the alleged last words of the philosopher praising greenery, nature, light, and God, and expressing his longing for eternal peace. The aria is long and phoney, like in an opera.

The natural curiosities not far from the palace have romantically exaggerated names: the Sea of Sand or the Desert. The sea is less than a kilometer in diameter. It looks like the scorched trace of a meteor. The forest is beautiful, dense, with birch, oak, and ash, with a coppery undergrowth. It is the wild patch of Ermenonville Park. An asphalt road dissects the green. Cars tear down it without abatement. I am the sole pedestrian. Some cars slow down and give me a careful look-over.

Ermenonville

> French literature was perfectly indifferent to the sight of green. It was Rousseau who revealed it to us. Thus, one can describe him with one word: Rousseau was the first to introduce "greenness" into our literature.
>
> SAINTE-BEUVE

> I continued reciting fragments of Héloise while Sylvie gathered wild strawberries.
>
> *SYLVIE*

THE THEORY OF GARDENS is more indispensable to an understanding of Classicism and pre-Romanticism than the theory of poetry. A walk in Ermenonville is more instructive than reading Delille. The eighteenth-century *jardin paysager* or "English garden" is a book of poetics, a catalogue of figures and tropes explicated by a cascade, a bridge, a cluster of trees, an artificial ruin. Everything needed by tender hearts: "the grotto of secret meetings," "the bench of a weary mother," "the tomb of an unhappy love." History was ruthless to these seedlings of sentimentalism. All the more reason to see Ermenonville, one of the best preserved eighteenth-century gardens.

It was the creation of the Marquis René de Girardin[12], portayed by Greuze as a rather homely gentleman with a large, pale face and the soft eyes of a hound. Dressed, as a biographer writes, “avec une élégance naturelle et très aristocratique” in a Werther outfit: a woolen frockcoat, a white, imaginatively tied foulard, and leather trousers gartered under the knees. He began his career under the sign of Mars, in deference to family tradition rather than choice. He was a captain at the court of Stanisław Leszczyński[13], Prince of Lorraine. After the Prince’s death, he spent most of his life tending to his inherited estate, and specially to establishing a park on the surrounding wasteland. His book *De la composition*[14] *des paysages sur le terrain, ou des moyens d’embellir la nature près des habitations, en joignant l’agréable à l’utile* (1777), is the fruit of eleven years of experience. The spirit of Jean-Jacques Rousseau hovers over it; Girardin adored the author of *La Nouvelle Héloise* whose pages are echoed by the leaves of Ermenonville. The Marquis based his children’s education on *Émile*, enriched with his own inventions. He placed a lunch-basket at the top of a high pole and made his offspring fetch their reward. The children grew up to be normal, however, and even rose to high positions.

The Marquis liked to travel; in his youth he visited Germany, Italy, and England, where he was deeply affected by the period’s horticultural epidemic. William Kent[15] designed a castle park, whose pattern was frequently imitated. The famous dandy Cobham[16] sank a fortune into similar endeavors; and William Shenstone’s[17] garden of cascades, ruins, and rocks influenced Girardin’s aesthetics most of all.

These undertakings coincided with the literary revival of Hesiod, Theocritus, and Virgil and the emergence of their followers: Thomson, Gessner, Young, Gray[18]. The patron of French bucolic poetry is longevous Fénelon. The Xanthe River winds “among poplars and willows whose fresh, delicate green covers innumerable nests of birds singing day and night.” “The plains are covered by golden corn; hills sag under the weight of the vine and the rising amphitheaters of fruit trees. Here nature was joyful and attractive, and the sky was sweet

and clear. The earth was ready to issue from her bosom new riches in return for human toil."

Sentimental landscape is the scenery of sentimental economy; it is no exaggeration to say that the springs of utopian socialism lie in Arcadia. Here, Virgil walks alongside Proudhon. The peasant woman Proxione "prepared wonderful cakes. She bred bees whose honey was sweeter than nectar which dripped down the oak timbers in the Golden Age. Cows came of their own accord to offer torrents of milk…daughters imitated their mothers, singing with great pleasure at work and as the sheep were led to the meadow. To this tune tender lambs danced on the grass."

In addition to the areas devoted to philosophical meditation and the higher emotions of the Marquis and his guests, a portion of the park was given to "our dearest peasants." Here the art of archery (highly venerated in Valois from time immemorial) was practiced; and the country musicians' rondo under an oak, where the traditional dances *guillot*, *saute*, *perrette* were danced.

Des habitants de l'heureuse Arcadie,[19]

Si vous avez les nobles moeurs,

Restez ici, goûtez-y les douceurs

Et les plaisirs d'une innocente vie…

The Marquis ordered this to be cut in stone because he was also a poet, and the fact that Ermenonville Park is full of his poems indicates that he cherished certain illusions regarding his talent.

Outdoor concerts for the upper class were often held on Poplar Island. Girardin met the author of *The Country Prophet* through their mutual musical interests. On May 20, 1778, Jean-Jacques arrived at Ermenonville and settled into a park pavilion with the ever-present Therèse Levasseur[22]. These were the philosopher's last days. He wandered in the neighborhood ("My mind needs movement"), his pockets full

of birdseed. He played with the children and told them fairytales. He considered writing a companion piece to Émile and played with musical ideas. Primarily, he walked in the park as became the author of *Reveries of the Solitary Walker*, and enriched his herbarium, enraptured by his beloved plant—the woodruff. “These six weeks are a blank in the history of Rousseau’s writing; not a single line of his work bears an Ermenonville date.” He lived in the Marquis’s park as in the heart of a dream realized.

Through the mercy of nature his death was easy, though its suddenness bred suspicion. On the night of July 4, 1778, his body was lowered by torchlight to a tomb, on Poplar Island, the most beautiful spot in Ermenonville Park. The inscription on the sepulchre reads: *Ici repose l’homme de la Nature et de la Vérité*[20]. Beside the funeral’s romantic side it also had a practical aspect. Five weeks earlier, the clergy had refused to bury Voltaire.

The body of Rousseau was laid to rest in a vault decorated with his bas-relief portrait by Lesueur[21]. In accordance with a decree of the Convention (and through no small effort of Therese Levasseur) his remains were transferred to the Pantheon. But the spirit of Jean-Jacques lingered in Ermenonville, which became the site of literary, philosophical, even imperial pilgrimages. It is the traditional setting of Napoleon’s famous remark: *L’avenir dira s’il n’eût pas mieux valu pour le repos de la terre*[23]*, que ni Rousseau ni moi n’eussions existé.*

The air of the park is green and heavy with dead sentiments. The paths are for those without aim, only to wander along bridges suspended over artificial waters toward the Altar of Dreams. Today, no one rests his hot forehead upon it. The Temple of Philosophy (devoted to Montaigne and left deliberately unfinished) evokes no deeper reflections than that one should not build ruins; history excels in producing them. Some columns have broken off the temple. Patient roots press them deeper and deeper into the ground.

Rousseau’s tomb is not the sole stone which bespeaks the passing of time. On the high, left bank of the river Aunette,

rests the Tomb of the Unknown. In the summer of 1791, a thirty-year-old neurasthenic committed a picturesque suicide. The "victime de l'amour," as he christened himself in his note to Marquis de Girardin, asked to be buried "sous quelque épais feuillage[24]."

Near the cascade of pond water lies the Grotto of the Naiads. From a nearby bench Marie-Antoinette gazed at the philosopher's sepulchre reflected in the still waters. The noble-sized, rectangular stone is graying in the long grass. The poplars are very tall. In the wind the dry, green flames look like Tintoretto's angels.

Ermenonville, a subtle instrument of sentiment and reflection, has been severely damaged by time. Numerous buildings have fallen to dust: the Altar to Friendship, the Obelisk of the Pastoral Muse, and the Pyramid, a homage to bucolic poets from Theocritus to Gessner, all are gone.

The park is now the property of a Touring Club. Excursions are herded along paths marked in guidebooks. Rousseau's tomb—*et voilà*. The cascade—*tiens, tiens, tiens*. The Altar of Dreams—*c'est à droite*. The air is laden with humidity and sighs: Marquis de Girardin's spirit covers his eyes and weeps. One must visit Ermenonville in early spring or late autumn when the Naiads are asleep, the Cascade is silent and the drained lake around Poplar Island is like a mirror of mud.

Return

THE CHARMS OF THE countryside—no sense of symmetry, of time, and an aversion to stupid rules.

One needs cunning to learn where the Ermenonville-Paris bus stops. "On ne sait jamais," sometimes at the bridge, other times at the tabac. I stake it on the tabac and win. We enter the night.

A stop in Senlis. At the stop a soldier and girl locked in an embrace, kiss, lost in each other. The driver coughs, blows the horn, flashes the lights, then turns to the passengers and smiles. Finally, he starts the bus slowly so that the soldier can

leave her without undue haste and jump in on the corner. On the radio Edith Piaf complains:

La fille de joie est belle

Au coin de la rue là-bas

Elle a une clientèle

Qui lui remplit son bas

When I return in twenty-five years' time, Piaf will be a dead star like Mistinguette. Her name will be a link with my generation, those who survived the same wars. I shall be understood whenever I casually mention her name.

In twenty-five years, how many generations of carp will have bitten the slime of the pond near the palace of Chantilly? Only Sassetta will be the same, and the virtue of poverty flying to the heavens like a stilled Eleatic arrow. Thanks to Sassetta I shall step twice into the same river, and time, the "boy playing with stones," will be merciful for a moment.

On the move again. I rush towards death. In my eyes—Paris—the chatter of lights.

STILL LIFE WITH A BRIDLE

translated by

John and Bogdana Carpenter

ESSAYS

DELTA

The visible world would be more perfect if seas and continents had a regular shape.

—MALEBRANCHE[1], *MÉDITATIONS CHRÉTIENNES*

"Imensi Tremor Oceanii"

—INSCRIPTION ON A SARCOPHAGUS OF MICHIEL DE RUYTER. AMSTERDAM, NIEUWE KERK

JUST AFTER CROSSING the Belgian-Dutch border, suddenly and without reason or reflection I decided to change my original plan. Instead of the classical road to the north I chose the road to the west, in the direction of the sea. I wanted to get to know Zeeland, even if superficially; I had never been there. All I knew was that I would not experience great artistic revelations.

Until now my travels through Holland had always followed the movement of a pendulum along the coast. That is, to speak graphically, from Bosch's[2] "Prodigal Son" in Rotterdam to "The Night Watch[3]" in Amsterdam's Rijksmuseum, a trajectory typical for someone who devours paintings, books, and monuments, leaving all the rest to those who, like the Biblical Martha, care only for earthly things.

At the same time I realized my limitations, because clearly the ideal traveler knows how to enter into contact with nature, with people and their history as well as their art. Only familiarity with these three overlapping elements can be the starting point of knowledge about a country. This time I allowed myself the luxury of leaving behind "essential and important" things in order to compare monuments, books, and paintings with the real sky, the real sea, and real land.

So we are driving through an enormous plain, a civilized steppe, the road as smooth as an airport runway amid endless meadows similar to the flat green paradise in the polyptych of the van Eyck brothers[4] in Ghent. Though nothing extraordinary happens, though I am prepared because I have read about it a hundred times, changes still take place in my sensory apparatus that are difficult to describe yet at the same time very concrete. My eyes of a city dweller, unused to the expansive landscape, fearfully and uncertainly check the faraway horizon as if learning to fly above an unattainable surface. It is similar to a huge overflow rather than a mainland, which in my experience is always associated with an accumulation of elevations, mountains, rising cities that break the line of the horizon. This is why I was in a state of constant alarm during my journeys in Greece and Italy, a never-ending need to reach a broader "birdlike" perspective that would allow me to take in the whole image, or at least a great part of it. This is why I climbed the steep slope of Delphi, strewn with marble, to see the spot of the mortal duel of Apollo with the beast. This is why I tried to climb Olympus in the illusory hope of embracing the entire Valley of Thessaly from sea to sea (to my misfortune, the gods had an important meeting in the clouds just at that moment, so I saw nothing). I also patiently polished winding steps in the towers of Italian city halls and churches. But my efforts were rewarded only with something that could be called a "torso of a landscape"—splendid, of course splendid fragments. Later they became pale and I arranged them in my memory like postcards, these deceitful images with false colors and false light, untouched by emotion.

Here in Holland, I had a feeling the smallest hill would be enough to take in the entire country: all its rivers, meadows, canals, its red cities, like a huge map that one can bring closer or move farther from the eyes. It was not at all a feeling accessible to lovers of beauty, or purely aesthetic. It was like a particle of the omnipotence that is reserved for the highest beings: to embrace the limitless expanse with its wealth of detail, herbs, people, waters, trees, houses, all that is contained only in God's eye—the enormous magnitude of the world and the heart of things.

Thus we drive through a plain that puts up no resistance, as if the laws of gravity were suddenly suspended. We move with the motion of a sphere on a smooth surface. We are overwhelmed by a powerful sensual feeling, blessed monotony, sleepiness of the eyes, dulled hearing, and the retreat of touch because nothing happens around us to cause anxiety or exaltation. Only later, much later, do we discover the fascinating richness of the great plain.

A STOP IN VEERE. It is reasonable to begin the sightseeing of a country not from its capitals or spots marked with "three stars" in a guide but precisely from a godforsaken province abandoned and orphaned by history. A matter-of-fact and laconic Baedeker from 1911 I never part with has devoted twelve cool lines to Veere ("manche Erinerungen aus seiner Blutezeit[5]"), while my precious Guide Michelin flies on the wings of touristlike poésie de circonstance: "Une lumière douce[6], une atmosphère ouatée et comme assoupie donnent à Veere l'allure d'une ville de légende…Ses rues calmes laissent le visiteur sous un charme mélancolique."

Indeed Veere, once famous, populous, and rich, is now a degraded, make-believe city; it is deprived of its own life like a moon reflecting the life and light of others. Only in the summer as a "port de plaisance" is it filled with a crowd of merry nomads; afterward it goes underground and leads the secret existence of plants. In the fall it gives the impression of a drawing from which the artist has removed people in order to

put city walls, buildings, and facades into relief. Streets and squares are empty, shutters closed. No one answers a ringing at the gates.

It looks as if the town was touched by an epidemic but the whole drama carefully concealed, victims removed behind the deceitful decorations of an idyll. A huge number of shops with antiques. At the day's end their windows look like cemeteries in the gentle light of dusk, huge still lifes.

A cane with a silver handle has a romance with a fan.

The square with the city hall is lit with amber light; a pretty building, with sculpted details but strong at the same time, sits squatly on the ground, proof of old splendor. A number of sculptures in niches on the facade: portraits of councillors, mayors, and benefactors of local history.

During my night wanderings I come upon a powerful building, thickset and smooth—a sculpture of God without a face. It emerges from the night similar to a rock growing from the ocean; not a single ray of light reaches this place. A dark mass of primordial matter against the background of night's blackness.

AN ATTACK OF ALIENATION, but a gentle one that touches most people transported into a foreign place. A sense of the otherness of the world, a conviction that nothing happening around takes me into account, that I am superfluous, rejected, and even ridiculous with my grotesque intention to see the old church tower.

In a state of alienation the eyes react quickly to objects and banal events that do not exist for the practical eye. I am surprised by the color of mailboxes, tramways, different shapes of copper doorknobs, knockers on doors, stairs always winding in a dangerous way, wooden shutters whose surface is crossed by two straight diagonal lines, a big "X" and the four fields of these big "X"s alternately filled with black and white, or white and red paint.

I know I waste too much time listening to a painted street organ huge as a gypsy's wagon, and also on the steps of the post office where I stand staring at a green vehicle coming out of the Moses and Aaron Street. It stirs up clouds of dust by setting brushes in its chassis into a whirling motion, which might not be the ideal way of cleaning a city but is a serious warning that dust will never find peace here.

Petty events, small street-fragments of reality.

It happens that my wanderings without any plan bring unexpected profit. For a long time the Binnenhof, or its interior courtyard, has been my favorite architectural complex in the center of The Hague. Surrounded by a pond, almost quiet in the late afternoon, as my master Fromentin[7] says, "It is an exceptional place, very solitary and not deprived of melancholy, especially when one comes at this time of day, when one is a foreigner and the joyful years no longer keep a man company. Imagine a great pool encircled by stiff embankments and black palaces. On the right a tree-lined, empty promenade, on the left the Binnenhof emerging out of the water with its brick facade, its slate-covered roof and grim expression, its physiognomy from another century or rather from all centuries, full of tragic memories, concealing an atmosphere characteristic of places on which history has left its traces…Exact but colorless reflections fall on the sheet of sleeping water with that somewhat deadly immobility of recollections which distant life leaves in extinguishing memory."

The romantic Mr. Fromentin spins out meditations about lofty things, history, beauty, fame. I, however, with all the force of my spirit cling to the brick. Never yet has this angular object awakened in me such fascination and fever to find out more about it.

Dusk is falling, the last acrid, Egyptian yellows go out, cinnabar becomes gray and fragile, the last fireworks of the day grow dark. All of a sudden there is an unexpected pause, a short-lasting interval in the darkness as if somebody in a hurry opened the door from a light room to a dark room. It happens as I sit on a bench several yards from the back wall of the

Ridderzaal, the Knights' Hall. For the first time I have the impression that the Gothic wall is like a fabric: perpendicular, taut, without any decorations, tightly woven with thick yarn and a narrow, stringy, pithy warp. The scale of colors is contained between ochre and umber with caprate added. The tint of the bricks is not uniform. From time to time a fawn-brown appears like a half-baked roll or the color of a fresh, crushed cherry, then again a mysterious violet covered with glaze. Instructed by the Knights' Hall, I start to appreciate the old, warm, close-to-the-earth brick.

During all my daily pacing of the street pavements and museum parquet floors, a tantalizing thought never leaves me: that my wanderings will be sterile if I do not manage to reach the interior, the inside of Holland untouched by the human hand and identical with what was looked at by my collective hero, the Dutch bourgeois of the seventeenth century. Only then could we exist in the same frame, against an eternal landscape.

The advertisements of the tourist agencies are banal and without imagination, the schedules of bus offices deprived of taste like the dinners of railway-station restaurants.

I wait thus for pure chance; and chance appears under the seductive name Valley of the River Lek and River Vlist.

The valley is like a bowl, and so green, black-green and violet-green, that everything becomes steeped in this thick damp color. Only the River IJssel retains its ashy color, like a flag of sovereignty before it drowns in the immensity of other waters.

On the left side of the road leading to Rotterdam, a herd of motionless windmills. This is the only view I take with me on the journey like a talisman.

Thus I am in Holland, the kingdom of things, great principality of objects. In Dutch, *schoon* means beautiful and at the same time clean, as if neatness was raised to the dignity of a virtue. Every day from early morning a psalm of washing, bleaching, sweeping, carpet beating, and polishing hovers over the whole land. What has disappeared from the surface of the

earth (but not from memory), what the ramparts of attics have protected is found in five regional museums with fairy-tale names: Ede, de Lutte, Apelddoorn, Lievelde, Marssum, Helmond. One can find there hundred-year-old coffee grinders, kerosene lamps, machines for drying marshes and irrigating fields, shoes for weddings and every day, instructions for polishing diamonds and forging harpoons, models of grocery stores, tailor shops, pastry shops, recipes for baking and holiday cakes, a drawing representing a huge shark on an ocean beach, and three ominous meteors.

I ask myself: why precisely in this country are a great-grandmother's bonnets, a cradle, a great-grandfather's frock coat made from Scottish wool, and a spinning wheel preserved with special care, an almost religious attention? The attachment to things was so great that pictures and portraits of objects were commissioned as if to confirm their existence and prolong their lives.

In numerous Renaissance and baroque pamphlets the Dutch appeared invariably as money-grubbers, penny-pinchers obsessed with the desire to possess. But true wealth was rare. It was limited almost exclusively to the regents, those who traditionally occupied the highest state and provincial offices. The Calvinist church did not advocate general poverty, it was only against ostentatiousness in clothes, delights of the table, and magnificent carriages. Luckily a number of ways existed to alleviate a conscience tormented by an excess of worldly possessions—for instance, founding poor-houses for children and old people—which led to a social system without equal in the world.

Money could be reason for pride. In his funereal epitaph the respectable merchant Isaac Le Maire passes over his virtues and good deeds but mentions (it might seem not very elevated for a voice from beyond the grave) a fortune he leaves behind of 150,000 guldens.

WE ARE NOW DRIVING north but cannot see the North Sea; it is concealed by a dike several yards high and the color

of sand. Below, at a distance of many miles, an incredible movement: trucks, bulldozers, people who look as if they were putting foundations under the Tower of Babel. In fact it is polder, retrieved from the sea bottom and dried, a new piece of land on which houses will stand in a year, with a lush meadow and majestic cows.

HOLLAND IS A YOUNG country—on a geological scale of course (postdiluvian). In fact it was a delta, a powerful mixture of the elements of earth and water: the Schelde, the Rhine, the Meuse, and the Waal. The old maps clearly show how the sea pitilessly encroached upon the land with powerful thrusts in the north as well as in the western provinces of Zeeland and Holland.

In a letter to Germaine de Staël Benjamin Constant[8] wrote, "This brave nation lives with all that it possesses on a volcano, the lava of which is water." This has not a word of exaggeration. It could be said that throughout its history Holland lost more people as a result of floods than during all its wars. Even taking into consideration the tendency of old chroniclers to exaggerate, the balance sheet is grim. The huge north bay of Zuider Zee was the result of a natural disaster that took fifty thousand human lives. In the eighteenth century, thirty-five floods were registered. One could prolong almost endlessly the list of these cemeteries without gravestones. Water attacked also the great cities of Haarlem. Amsterdam, and Leyden; when in 1421 the ring closed around Dordrecht, one could see from its tower only a desert of water, without a single living soul.

The systematic struggle with flood disasters started at the turn of the sixteenth century. It was the work of excellent artisans and engineers, not to mention self-taught geniuses. Jan Leeghwater[9] undoubtedly belonged to their number, and thanks to his works he achieved the somewhat exaggerated nickname of the Dutch Leonardo da Vinci. The range of his interests was indeed Renaissance-like: he built a city hall in De Rijp, he sculpted and did some painting, his works in

metal, wood, and ivory enjoyed great popularity. He constructed ordinary as well as musical clocks and a huge number of machines to dry the soil.

Leeghwater thought that the addition of witchcraft and mystery could not harm science but on the contrary might help it. He organized shows to which he invited an elite audience. In France in the presence of Prince Maurice[10] he demonstrated a machine in the shape of a bell: he let himself be drowned in the machine, and under water wrote a psalm taken from the Bible, fortified his body with a few pears, then appeared to the court whole, healthy, and bursting with energy.

AFTER SEVERAL DAYS I grew accustomed to the thought that I would not see the views painted by the Dutch masters of the "Golden Age." In Italy it is enough to lean out the train window to see a fragment of Bellini flash in front of your eyes, or the sky of Umbria as it was registered ages ago. In Holland I found instead the largest collection of landscapes that were contained in frames. The Flamand Patinir[11], who painted in the sixteenth century, shone like a guiding star: a master of spaces built from perpendicular screens and brown, green, and blue perspectives. Then came others; constellations and hierarchies kept changing. The fabulous mannerists van Coninxloo[12] and Seghers[13], simple-hearted Avercamp[14], Cuyp[15], Potter[16], the painter of the apotheosis of artiodactylus, Hobbema[17], and De Momper[18], to mention only a few of my favorite landscape painters.

The knowledge I received in school—it is well known that this is a bundle of correct facts as well as dogmatic idiocies—left me with the conviction that the greatest landscape painter was Jacob Ruysdael[19]. "Toward the end of the seventeenth century at a time when painters specialized in specific thematic genres, this landscape painter with an unusual personality, knowledge, and insatiable curiosity recorded in his works in a matchless manner the indissoluble union of water, land, and sky characteristic of the Dutch landscape. No one

else was able to show in such a moving way the mutual harmony of atmospheric values and the shape of clouds."

This tirade of a well-known scholar, more inspired than lucid, raises Ruysdael to the rank of cherubim. In the words of the illustrious though unrestrained art historian, the painter becomes an archangel. I was faithful to him for so many years, and continued to revere his epic canvases, calm, painted from a perspective of the dunes where one can see spreading meadows, stripes of white linen on them, and on the horizon the respectable city of Haarlem with the powerful Church of Saint Bavo, wings of windmills glimmering in the sun. Above it all the huge sky (its relation to the land one to four). I always worshiped Ruysdael; but as a guide through old, provincial Holland, I chose Jan van Goyen[20].

I would still like to say why my feelings for Ruysdael cooled. Well, it happened when spirit began to enter his canvases and everything became "soulful," every leaf, every broken branch, drop of water. Nature was sharing our own anxieties and sufferings, transitoriness and death. For me nature that lacks compassion is the most beautiful: a cold world in another world.

THREE LARGE, LOW-LYING RIVERS with their tributaries, thousands of brooks and streams, a huge drainage of water called the Haarlem Lake, all this created favorable conditions for communication. Highways shaded by trees were often built next to the canals, from Delft to The Hague, from Leyden to Amsterdam; they met with general approval and pride. William Temple, the English ambassador at The Hague for a long time, maintained that the road from Scheveningen to The Hague (barely a few kilometers) could be ranked with "the work of the Romans," which was an exaggeration.

The situation changed with the seasons. The public stage-coach, introduced in the middle of the seventeenth century, had four wheels but no springs, causing an unbearable jolting of travelers; the whole vehicle dragged behind it clouds of dust

that covered everything. The Estates General imposed a normalized set of wheels on vehicles, which was reasonable; they also strengthened the highway police, especially in forested terrain. Brigands caught red-handed were punished on the spot and without trial. Huygens[21], a statesman, humanist, poet, and sensitive man, did not like to waste his time even when traveling—riding along the bank of the Rhine, he counted the imposing number of fifty gallows on a road less than twenty kilometers long. This was his contribution to the statistics of verdicts that were carried out.

The car creaks, squeaks, rolls with difficulty on a hummock of land—the light is now like honey—one more curve, on the left a cluster of birches strongly bent toward the canal's water heavy with browns and shadowy greens, the smell of slime and rotting tree trunks. On the right something that with a great dose of fantasy might be called a farm: a house with plaster peeling from its walls, the roof a hundred-year-old map of storms, a tall brick chimney like a turret repelling the last assault. What country is it? Whose domain? What is the name of the ruler?

Setting out with my favorite landscape painter, Jan van Goyen, I was not sure whether we would ride a highway on land or a road of the imagination. Van Goyen painted a number of so-called "Village Lanes," and we have tried to describe one of these. The outline is simple, beginning at the base of the painting: a narrow canal, a sandy sprawling road, a shed or something that once upon a time was a house and today is a picturesque ruin, a few scrawny trees, and a goat, the heraldic animal of poverty.

All this elicits many questions. Where did the enthusiasts for this subject matter come from in prosperous Holland? Were there any such alleys of poverty in the country? (My guide, Jan van Goyen, completely convinces me with the magic of his art.) Where do the true Troy and Eliot's Wasteland exist?

A road through a village, a ferry floating down the river, a hut among dunes, clusters of trees and haystacks, travelers waiting for a ride—these are the typical subjects of van

Goyen's paintings. Canvases with no anecdote, loosely composed, flimsy and slim, with a weak pulse and nervous outline, they quickly leave their imprint on the memory. The eye assimilates them without any resistance, and they remain on the retina for a long time. When I first saw van Goyen's painting I felt I had waited a long time for just this painter, that he filled a gap in the museum of my imagination I had sensed for a long time. It was accompanied by an irrational conviction that I knew him well and forever. From where did van Goyen take the themes of his can-vases? Sometimes it can be determined without difficulty on the basis of the fragments of the architecture he represents.

In the large painting in the Museum of Art History in Vienna we easily recognize the churches and towers of Dordrecht on great, gray water cut by waves shaped like half-moons and regular as ornaments. But in the beautiful painting in Munich's Pinakotheka, "View of Leyden," the painter moved the Church of Saint Pancras outside the city, placing it on a peninsula surrounded by water on both sides. The old, intricate Gothic church towers above a group of fishermen, shepherds, and cows on the far shore of an imaginary landscape. Often the topography of his works is unclear: somewhere beyond the dune, on the shore of some river, at the turn of a road, on a certain evening…. It was said the master had the cheapest elementary props in his atelier you can imagine: clay, brick, lime, pieces of plaster, sand, straw. From these leftovers, rejected by the world, he created new worlds.

In his middle period van Goyen painted a number of excellent monochromatic works dominated by bistre, sepia, and heavy green. The Dutch did not invent the method of painting with a single color but endowed it with grace and naturalness, because monochromatism is an accurate epitome of visible reality, a rendering of sheen and atmosphere (a blue-gray glow a moment before a storm, the light of summer afternoons heavy with lazy gold).

This great painter managed his talent very poorly. He was an appreciated, prolific artist, but the fact that he sold his paintings for the beggarly price of five to twenty-five guldens barred his chances of a serious career. No one with self-

respect, unless constrained to do so, would sell his canvases for a price only slightly higher than the cost of materials.

He started to learn his profession very early, as a ten-year-old boy: he changed his masters five times, finally entering the atelier of Esaias van de Velde[22], not much older than himself and creator of excellent landscapes that seem washed by rain.

Van Goyen did not settle down in a single place. He led a rather nomadic life, traveled to Germany and England, and returned with portfolios of sketches. His drawings are quick, impressionistic, and without many details, executed as if with a single stroke of the pencil not lifted from the paper. He always preferred a narrow palette of complementary colors to a painting constructed from many contrasts; in this sense he remained a monochromatic painter to the end.

When he was almost forty-five he settled down in The Hague, which did not in the least mean financial stability. So he had tried everything.

He did not lack ideas. He traded the paintings of his colleagues, organized auctions, speculated on houses and land and also the wretched tulips.

The result of these commercial acrobatics was a double bankruptcy and death in debts. His malicious contemporaries maintained that his only favorable transaction was matrimonial; he married his daughter to a shrewd and canny inn-keeper, the painter Jan Steen.

What emerges from fog and rain, what is reflected in a drop of water? Jan van Goyen's "Landscape of Objects" is in the Dahlem Museum, a painting so small it can be covered by the hand. But it is neither a notation, a sketch, nor a trial version for a larger work; it is a full-blooded painting, self-contained, with a composition as simple as a chord. From the grayness of sky and earth emerges a clump of osiers whose fingerlike leaves are painted with a juicy dark green. From time to time among the thickets, a small yellow accent. The picture does not hang from a wall. This shred of the world was placed in a glass case, to make one bow over it.

OFTEN AFTER MY VACATIONS I listened to conversations in which the light of faraway countries was praised. But what really is the light for which artists in the past would leave their native towns, found artists' communities, profess a solar cult, and pass into history as the school from N? What is the light of Holland, so luminous for me in the paintings but absent in immediate surroundings? I decided once to devote a whole day to meteorological studies. In the morning the weather was nice but the sun seemed suspended in an opaque, viscous liquid similar to a soft light bulb, without a trace of a *l'azzurro*. The clouds appeared and quickly disappeared. Exactly at one-thirty in the afternoon it suddenly cooled off, and in half an hour torrential, heavy-grained, dark-blue rain began. It struck with fury against the ground and seemed to be returning to the sky to fall with greater implacability. It lasted about an hour. Exactly at seven in the evening I left for Scheveningen to pursue my studies further. The rain had already stopped. Piles of clouds all over the west. The resort, the cabins, the casino now dazzlingly white were covered with a coating of violet. A moment before eight everything changed: a staggering festival began, of water vapor, forms, colors, metamorphoses difficult to describe because even the evening sun sent out frivolous pinks and farcical gold.

The spectacle finished. The sky was clear. The wind stopped. Faraway lights went on and off, and all of a sudden without warning, without a breeze or anticipation, a huge cloud the color of ash appeared, a cloud in the shape of a god torn apart.

THE PRICE OF ART

Was macht die Kunst?

Die Kunst geht nach Brot.

Dass muss sie nicht, dass soll sie nicht.

—LESSING, *EMILIA GALOTTI*

A LARGE ROOM, RATHER dark despite a high vaulted window on the left. Lazy daylight seeps through thick glass panes framed in lead.

Where a painter is seated, wooden easels have been placed perpendicular to the window. He wears a beret, an old, thick jacket, puffed pantaloons, and heavy, shapeless boots. He rests his right leg against the lower crossbar of the easel. His hand, with a brush, approaches the surface of the painting.

One can easily imagine his patient, irregular swinging movement: bending forward—placing the paint; leaning backward—checking the effect. A piece of paper is nailed to the upper frame of the painting: a sketch of the work being painted.

At the rear, elevated above the rest of the atelier (it is entered by steps), an apprentice grinds pigments against a darkening wall.

Is this how art is born? In a dark interior amid dust, cobwebs, and an indescribable disorder of objects with no grace or beauty? Even the painter's accessories—messy sketchbooks, jars, brushes, sheets of paper, a plaster cast of a

head, a wooden mannequin—are degraded to the role of kitchen utensils.

There is no trace of mystery, magic, or rapture in this painting. It requires a great and devious imagination, like that of a certain art historian, to see a Faustian atmosphere here. There is no one behind the painter's back. With a small change of props, a maker of tables or a master of the needle could be working in this room.

All the subtle tastes of the aesthetes, all their fantasies must be disappointed and retreat from the thick physicalness of the work. The painter's matter is heavy, rough-hewn, and massive.

Such is the "Painter in His Workshop" by Adriaen van Ostade[1] (1610–1685): oil on an oak board, with the dimensions 38 by 35.5 centimeters.

SEVERAL YEARS AFTER THROWING off their foreign yoke the small Netherlands, with a population of barely two million, became a colonial empire, a flourishing, powerful country and political organism strong enough to defy powers like France, England, and Spain. In the Europe of the seventeenth century, torn by religious wars, it was an unusual, universally admired asylum of freedom, tolerance, and prosperity.

A large number of accounts by travelers who visited Holland during its "golden age" have been preserved. The young bourgeois republic intrigued visitors with the uniqueness of its lifestyle and peculiar political system, the inhabitants' antlike industriousness and inventiveness, as well as their healthy, concrete, down-to-earth attitude toward life.

William Temple[2], the English ambassador at The Hague and meticulous observer of the Dutch scene, noted: "Men live together like Citizens of the World, associated by the common ties of Humanity, and by the bonds of Peace, Under the impartial protection of indifferent Laws." The envoy of His Royal Highness idealized the country of his mission, which is

not strange because he moved in the highest social spheres. Numerous pamphlets and lampoons of the period show that the Dutch were envied and fiercely disliked by their neighbors, who compared them to parasites feeding on human blood. Cardinal Richelieu flung abuse at them: “Bloodsuckers, starving lice.” It was written that they were “merchants of butter who milk cows in the trough of the ocean, and live in forests they have sown themselves, or in swamps changed into gardens.” Who could fail to notice in this sentence an unintended note of admiration?

There are also less subjective observations that touch on our subject, and, what is more important, are not seasoned with bile. Peter Mundy[3], who visited Amsterdam in 1640, was surprised by the passion of the Dutch for painting. Pictures could be found not only in the homes of rich bourgeois but also in various shops and taverns, even in artisans’ workshops, streets, and squares. Another traveler, John Evelyn[4], saw a huge number of paintings at the annual fair in Rotterdam, while in other countries these were luxury objects only the rich could afford. The very fact of exhibiting them among stalls, clucking chickens, mooing cattle, junk, vegetables, fish, farm products, and household objects must have seemed very peculiar, and was difficult for an average visitor to understand.

Trying to explain this phenomenon, Evelyn let himself be carried away by fantasy when he claimed that even ordinary peasants spent two or three thousand pounds on paintings (a huge sum, equivalent to an acre of a garden or almost three acres of meadow), and that they did it from purely mercenary motives because after a certain time they sold their “collections” with a considerable profit. The English traveler was wrong. Paintings were indeed objects of speculation, but they were not the best investment of capital. It was much more profitable to lend money at interest, or, for instance, buy shares of stock.

One thing is certain: painting in Holland was omnipresent. It seems that the artists tried to augment the visible world of their small country and to multiply reality by the thousands, tens of thousands of canvases on which they recorded

seashores, floodwaters, dunes, canals, distant vast horizons, and the views of cities.

The luxuriant development of Dutch painting in the seventeenth century is not associated with the name of any powerful protector, eminent person, or institution who spread a coat of patronage over the painter. When we speak of a "golden period" in the history of culture, we have a custom of always trying to find a Pericles, a Maecenas, or the Medicis.

In Holland it was different. The Princes of Orange do not seem to have noticed their native art, Rembrandt, Vermeer, van Goyen, and so many others. They preferred the representative Baroque painting of the Flamands or Italians. When Amalia van Solms[5], widow of Prince Frederick Henry, decided to beautify her suburban villa her choice fell precisely on a Flamand, Rubens's pupil Jacob Jordaens[6], a painter of sensual, large, and fat works. Lucrative orders from the court were thus out of the question. The gentry, small in number and deprived of political influence, had no ambition to support the art of their country or even to mold fashion and taste. Finally the church, traditionally a powerful protector of artists in all other countries, closed to them the doors of its temples, which displayed dignified, austere, Calvinist nakedness.

The question comes to mind: what was the material situation of the Dutch painters, and to what should we ascribe their enormous productivity? It could not have been only an idealistic love for beauty. Our answer will be complex and unfortunately not unequivocal. We are doomed to fragmentary, incomplete data, barely translatable into contemporary language.

MEMBERS OF THE FRATERNITY of Saint Luke—a proud name, which might also designate evangelical poverty—were treated as artisans, and without exception came from the lower social classes. Sons of millers, petty merchants and manufacturers, innkeepers, tailors, dyers, such was their social status and no other. And their works? They were certainly

objects of aesthetic delight, but they were also creations subject to the laws of the market, the implacable laws of supply and demand.

"Each thing that is an object of exchange must be comparable to other things. This is the purpose of money, which has become an intermediary," writes Aristotle. Therefore our search must necessarily meander among boring numbers, and we will attempt to gather the spilled pebbles into a hopefully sensible whole.

It is difficult to determine the costs of supporting an "average" family (terrible term of the statisticians) of Dutch artisans in the period we are describing. We do not know the retail prices of many necessities, only wholesale prices. But we know that the cost of living almost tripled between the end of the sixteenth century and the middle of the seventeenth century. Currency lost its value. Earnings increased, but not in proportion to inflation. As usual the estates and the capital of the wealthy swelled, but the margin of indigence and even poverty was considerable.

What are we to make of a situation as fluid as life itself? What subtle surveying instruments could be used to seize the economic phenomena in all their complexity but also in a concrete place and time? On the basis of available sources one could say that in a given year a house in Amsterdam cost so much, but this is very little to go on. Sociologists, and especially their strange mutation "sociologists of art," are prodigal with florins and guldens to dazzle the reader and bestow the splendor of science, almost mathematics, on their poor knowledge.

Let us therefore use the approach that seems most sensible: to determine (when source materials make it possible) the payments and earnings in seventeenth-century Holland. We accept as a monetary unit the gulden, worth more or less as much as the florin, which was also used as currency. Other legal tender existed, but it is safer not to venture into that thicket.

Different attempts have been made with limited success to establish the relation of the gulden to contemporary currencies.

The comparison with gold, a seemingly reliable measure, also turned out to be problematic; in relation to this precious metal the gulden constantly lost value. One should therefore take into account the complicated quotations of the stock exchange. One serious researcher wrote that in Rembrandt's time the gulden had a purchasing power twenty times greater than the contemporary gulden. This might be true, but years have passed since the publication of his dissertation, and the meaning of the statement, taken from the air, has evaporated back into the air.

We are dealing with a beast difficult to describe—it is better to realize this right away. Worn-out coins, talents, cistertians, ducats, Rhine thalers, are like old demons where the same eternal potentiality of good and evil is lurking, a force pushing toward crime and deeds of mercy, passion concentrated in a small piece of metal that is similar to the passion of love or a call leading to the peaks of a human career, but also under the ax of the executioner.

We can find a measure for wealth with Paul Zumthor, who presents us with the tax registers from Amsterdam in 1630. These show that about 1,500 estates were valued at 25,000 to 55,000 florins. Considerably larger estates existed, such as that of Lopez Suasso, a Portuguese who settled in Holland and lent 2 million guldens to Prince William III for his English expedition.

Physical laborers and artisans employed in manufacturing were poorly remunerated. The fate of weavers at the beginning of the century is particularly worthy of pity; in Leyden alone, twenty thousand of these unfortunate people, who received a pittance for a twelve-hour day of work, were cooped up in various hovels. Numerous revolts and disturbances improved their situation, so that by the middle of the century they earned seven guldens a week. The wages of a fisherman on a herring boat were five to six guldens a week; qualified workers such as ship carpenters and masons in large cities earned ten guldens a week.

We know nothing of the mass of ordinary people, the poor, the noisy, the ones who drank heavily or hunted constantly for

any earnings. Old dictionaries transmit the names of their "professions": unlicensed traders, day laborers, peddlers. One can believe they revealed an animal resilience and determination in the craft of life, that despite everything they kept their heads above water.

THE PRICES OF PAINTINGS and the peculiar mechanisms of the market where works of art were thrown are well known, thanks to published materials from the abundant Dutch archives.

The rich harvest of talents, the hundreds of ateliers in nearly every town of the Republic created a huge supply of paintings that exceeded the demand by far. Painters worked under the overwhelming pressure of a growing number of competitors. Art criticism did not exist. The enlightened spheres did not impose any definite taste—this was democratic but often resulted in an outstanding painter finding himself in a material situation worse than that of a less gifted colleague. Speculation in works of art was highly developed, governed by rules totally different from aesthetic considerations.

In a recently published book J. M. Montias has checked fifty-two inventories from the years 1617–1672, preserved in the archives of Delft. He estimated the average price of a painting was 16.6 guldens (7.2 guldens for an unsigned painting). The industrious calculation is worth our attention, for it contains a valuable piece of general information. Let us try to be disloyal to statistical "truth" in favor of what is singular, full-blooded, and not comparable: the concrete price paid for concrete paintings. Here we discover an amazing range and diversity.

What determined the market price of a painting? The name of the artist and the renown of the atelier, but to an even greater extent, the subject matter. There is no reason to be indignant. The represented world or a story about people has always satisfied the need for knowledge inherent in our nature, and admiration for successful imitation is something very normal despite the prophets of sterile purity.

Both the public and seventeenth-century Dutch writers about art, such as Karel van Mander[7] and Samuel van Hoogstraten[8] (painters themselves), placed the so-called *historiën* at the top of the genres. These were figurative compositions. A hero, a crowd, a dramatic event taken from the Bible or mythology enjoyed unabated popularity and fetched high prices. This judgment is constant, originating in antiquity (*vide* Pliny); it continued with theoreticians of Renaissance art all the way to the nineteenth century. Historical painting meant the towering peak of art.

A French traveler noted with surprise that 600 guldens were asked for a painting by Vermeer that represented only one person. It is like a distant echo of medieval standards, when the artist depicting the interior of a church was paid according to the number of columns he painted.

A Dutchman ordering market scenes from his favorite painter requested that they have an ever-larger number of slabs of meat, more and more fish and vegetables. O the insatiable, never satisfied hunger for reality!

In theory landscapes, genre scenes, and still lifes were valued much lower than historical painting. So why does seventeenth-century Dutch art have such an abundance, even more a predominance, of works belonging to these "lower" genres? Because strong competition requires specialization; such is the law of the market. Every grocery merchant knows that for the good of his firm he must stock a special brand of tea or a particularly aromatic brand of tobacco that attracts buyers.

The same happened in art. The struggle for survival forced the painter to remain faithful to a chosen genre. Because of this a potential buyer would retain him in his eye and memory; it was universally known that Willem van de Velde[9], for example, was synonymous with the "Maritime Firm," and Pieter de Hooch[10], with the "Firm of Bourgeois Interiors." If one lovely day a portrait painter reached the conclusion that he had had enough of the fat, bloated faces of councillors and decided from then on to paint flowers—which are so much more graceful—he took an enormous risk on his shoulders.

For he would lose his present clients and enter the domain of other painters who for years had specialized in bouquets of tulips, narcissuses, and roses.

AMONG SO MANY MASTERPIECES in the Uffizi Gallery it is easy to overlook a small painting from the brush of Frans van Mieris[11], "The Family Concert." It is a scene from the life of elegant Dutch society, known for its fervent passion for music. The instruments have just gone silent, and the admirers of Polyhymnia refresh themselves with wine. Against the background of a rich interior only six persons are presented, as that Frenchman who looked at Vermeer would say. Despite this the Prince of Tuscany, Cosimo III, paid a sum for the painting that was stunning by Dutch standards—2,500 guldens, 900 guldens more than the merchants who ordered Rembrandt's "Night Watch" took from their pockets.

What was the range of prices of Dutch paintings in the seventeenth century? This is a problem that cannot be reduced to a clear, comprehensible formula, or summed up in a single pale "average."

In the complicated mechanism of the trade of works of art, not only rational factors but also unpredictable chance played a role—for instance the material situation of the artist at a given moment, and the good but often bad will of the buyer, who only waited for the best moment to enter into possession of paintings and pay as little as possible.

During the period of his fame Rembrandt set hard conditions and often received as much as he asked. But others, recognized today as masters, had to be satisfied with a payment so pitiful it is difficult to understand how they avoided going under, even with the greatest industriousness.

IN 1657 A WELL-KNOWN antique and art dealer, Johannes de Renialme, died in Amsterdam. As usual in such cases, work

began immediately on a detailed inventory of his estate. In addition to property, jewelry, and curios, it included more than four hundred paintings. And what paintings: Holbein, Titian, Claude Lorraine, the most eminent Dutch masters. Next to each item a realistic market price was given, the price that could be received hic et nunc according to the opinion of competent painters and professional appraisers if the inheritance was to be realized. In Dutch archives many inventories are preserved that are priceless, trustworthy documents for researchers.

Rembrandt's painting "Christ and the Adulteress" was appraised highest, at the respectable sum of 1,500 guldens. This seems completely understandable because of the artist's rank and the elevated subject, belonging to those *historiën* so much praised by art theoreticians. But despite the theoreticians a typical genre scene came right after Rembrandt, namely Gerard Dou's[12] "Kitchen Maid," highly appraised at six hundred guldens. Dou was a sought-after, constantly fashionable painter. Warm, somewhat sweetish colors, a masterly play of light, immaculate, precise drawing (anecdotes were told how he spent the whole day painting brooms and brushes, each bristle separately), these won him admirers beyond Holland's frontiers as well. But other genre painters, not at all worse, were treated harshly. At the very bottom of the inventory of Johannes Renialme's estate came Brouwer[13], in our estimate an excellent painter, whose canvas was scandalously appraised at barely six guldens.

We can only guess at the impact of this huge range of prices on the psychology of the painters, from reimbursement for costs of materials all the way to a sum of many years' wages for a qualified artisan. It might have been a stimulant for many, because it contained an element of hazard: hope for great winnings, a sudden change in life's bad luck. A chance existed that one day a generous buyer would appear, a prince from a fairy tale like Cosimo who with one purchase would open perspectives of wealth. Very likely Gerard Terborch[14] nourished such a hope in his heart when he painted "The Peace of Muenster" (1648).

The majority probably did not count on miracles. They worked by the sweat of their brows and experienced many slumps, when they had to get rid of their works for nothing.

In 1641 Adriaen's brother Isaac van Ostade[15], crushed by financial troubles, sold thirteen of his paintings to a merchant for the ridiculous price of 27 guldens. (Documents have transmitted the name of the extortioner.) Two guldens barely covered his costs, the price of paints and canvas. Ten guldens were sometimes paid for apprentices' copies.

In the homes of seventeenth-century Holland, even those of the middle-class and less affluent bourgeois, one could find a hundred, two hundred, and even more paintings. This was something not encountered anywhere else. When we read that a certain widow in Rotterdam liquidated the estate of her deceased husband and sold, so to say wholesale, 180 paintings for 352 guldens, a situation not very advantageous for the artist opens before us. A huge supply: there were too many cheap paintings on the market. This state of affairs was partly alleviated by the growing affluence of the upper spheres of society, their passion for collecting, and their unremitting love for Dutch painting.

We are surprised today that the paintings of the old masters van Eyck, Memling, Quentin Matsys—splendid progenitors of Flemish art—were relatively inexpensive, and did not arouse as much interest as one might suppose. In 1654 it was possible to purchase a portrait from the brush of Jan van Eyck at well-known dealers for 18 guldens.

PAINTINGS IN SEVENTEENTH-CENTURY HOLLAND were objects of speculation, or increased exchange. They often went from hand to hand and were traded in different ways, which led some researchers to claim that in this country they became similar to money—a substitute currency. A closer analogy would be stock shares with a changeable, capricious market value, difficult to foresee.

The Dutch painter could pay for almost anything with his paintings. He often saved himself from bankruptcy or prison by getting rid of his works. Rembrandt was notorious for it; for instance he gave away to Dirck van Cattenburgh a number of paintings and sketches to cover a large debt amounting to 3,000 guldens.

Loans were secured by pledging paintings; debts (card debts as well) were paid with them, cobblers', butchers', bakers', and tailors' bills were settled with paintings. In such cases the latitude of prices was great, and the advantage of the creditor-predator evident. But exceptions occurred. The mediocre Flemish artist Matteus van Helmont[16], who painted in the manner of Teniers[17] and Brouwer, was unable to pay a debt to a brewer; he gave him only one painting, "The Peasants' Wedding," and subtracted from his bill the substantial amount of 240 guldens, a sum Vermeer never obtained. The excellent Joos De Momper, who painted "impressionist" landscapes surging like a stormy sea, had an inclination for wine and visited all too often the tavern of a certain Gijsbrecht van der Cruyse. As a result, twenty-three landscapes by De Momper were hung in the house of the owner of the winery in a special room, the finest in the house, upholstered in gilded leather—a collection not owned by the richest museums of the world.

Jan Steen[18], owner of an inn, painted a canvas for his supplier and received a barrel of wine. A certain painter of flowers who was in debt to a baker for 35 guldens gave him a painting that the baker sold for triple profit soon afterward.

With paintings it was possible to pay off a house, buy a horse, and give a dowry to a daughter if the master did not possess any other wealth. We are familiar with some of the complex, long-term contracts. A painter sells his colleague a house for the sum of 9,000 guldens. The buyer commits himself to deliver each month a painting valued at 31 guldens (a "large" one, because a middle-size painting was worth 18 guldens). If there was a delay in delivery, an agreed-upon fine was set at the amount of six guldens. The painter's supplies,

paints, canvas, and frames were paid half-and-half by both sides.

Here is a peculiar agreement touching on otherworldly matters. In exchange for lower rent, a painter promised the landlord to paint the portrait of his beloved daughter, deceased years ago.

The painting of portraits (they made Rembrandt's reputation and then contributed to his fall) limited the artist's risk, because as a rule the model was the purchaser. He would ask to be immortalized in the period of his prosperity, and often the ambition to entrust this task to a good master got the better of stinginess. One had to paint full cheeks, eyes boldly looking into the future, and also the lace and satin of festive attire as exactly as possible. Everyone wants to look better and more dignified than in reality.

Sometimes painters would succumb to the amusing mythomania of their clients. The buyer who signed a contract with Jan Lievens[19] obligated the artist to present him as Scipio Africanus and his wife as Pallas Athena. The grocery merchant Gabriel Leyencamp, with the unbridled fantasy characteristic of grocers, requested that the painter represent him as the Archangel Gabriel, and his beloved as the Madonna.

ON THE ART MARKET there were many mediocre paintings next to good ones and even shoddy ones (rubbish covered with a patina appears more noble to us), as well as an innumerable number of copies. After all, apprentices started their education by copying, mature masters "repeated" their own paintings, and those who were less able counterfeited the talented and fashionable painters without scruples.

In 1632 Adriaen Brouwer declared before a notary that he had made only one painting, titled "Peasants' Dance," and that the painting was in the possession of Rubens. In this way the artist wanted to cut himself off from the counterfeit Brouwers in circulation, probably a struggle with windmills. The

procedure of counterfeiting paintings, as old as art itself, developed in Holland in the seventeenth century on a grand scale and with a rush.

The story we will now tell, simplified greatly, has all the elements of a picaresque novel. It could be called "The Greatness and Fall of Gerrit Uylenburgh[20]."

Who was the hero? A painter without talent. As we know from history, these can be individuals who are dangerous for those around them, especially when endowed by nature with a will to power or at least an overwhelming imperative pushing them to make a career at any price. His father Henry Uylenburgh, cousin of Rembrandt's wife Saskia, tried his hand at many jobs: he traded works of art, was an estate appraiser, cleaned and varnished. A modest, laborious, worry-filled gray life.

His son Gerrit was made of different clay. Clever, ambitious, he had a gift of winning people over and wove an intricate web of connections and acquaintances until he gained the confidence of the Republic's influential personalities. In 1660 the Estates General entrusted him with a mission of envoy to the court of the English King Charles II. As a gift for the king Gerrit carried twenty-four paintings of the Italian School purchased from a wealthy widow for the sum—by no means trivial—of 80,000 guldens.

The journey toward the shores of the island with his precious cargo decided Uylenburgh's fate. Neither sea demons nor the Great Tempter needed to trouble themselves; the temptation was born of itself in Gerrit's practical head. It took the form of a dazzlingly simple idea. There was not much sense in importing paintings from Venice or Rome, since enough artists lived in Holland who knew how to paint everything no worse and, in addition, far less expensively. The Italians had to be beaten with their own weapon. This was his war cry.

After his return to Amsterdam, Gerrit bought two houses where he arranged exhibition rooms, ateliers, and gathered artists who craved a steady income. This is how the great

fabrication of Italian painting in Holland began. The whole affair was surrounded with proper discretion.

In the beginning everything developed favorably and the business flourished. Suddenly, quite unexpectedly, crafty fate threw its treacherous nets over Gerrit. It was when he signed a very profitable contract with the Prince-Elector of Brandenburg to supply him with thirteen paintings by famous Italian masters. He took an advance of 4,000 guldens. But who could have foreseen that in the prince's court at the time was a Dutch painter of flowers, Henry Fromentin, who years ago had worked dog-cheap for the manufacturer of the Italian paintings "Made in Amsterdam." His revenge was sweet, his expertise overpowering; not a single one of the paintings was an authentic work of the Italian School.

From now on events develop at an accelerated pace. The prince sends the paintings back, the whole affair gets publicity. Outraged Gerrit calls a commission of nine experts, which pronounces a Solomon's verdict: some paintings are good, some less good, but all could be found in collections of Italian art. It is not known what this was supposed to mean. In enigmatic verdicts, as in mysterious women, a certain lack of clarity possesses its own charm.

Ambitious Gerrit is not satisfied with this resolution. For years he fiercely defends his merchant's honor and, speaking more simply, his existence.

The judgments of experts multiply. A group of specialists, among them excellent painters such as van Aelst and Kalf[21], categorically decides that Gerrit's entire collection is an accumulation of incompetent kitsch. On the other hand the verdict of another commission, called later on, is less emphatic; thirty-one painters speak for the authenticity of the paintings, twenty against. As with the conjectural prosecution, the contradictory opinions of experts obscure the matter even further.

The affair develops on two planes. The first is a spectacular scandal that holds the entire artistic world of Holland in suspense. Jokes, pamphlets, and poems circulate written by self-taught but also well-known poets like Vondel[22]. They

defend Uylenburgh or pitilessly make fun of him. Let us be frank—all those who passionately like to watch public executions or bankruptcies with a bang have here a great dose of healthy entertainment.

We can guess at the hidden mainsprings of the affair on another, deeper level. How to explain the great disparity of opinion of the several score Dutch painters who took part in the appraisal? Was it not a trial *in absentia* of the art of the Italians, who were a dangerous, unbeatable competition for the native artists?

At last Gerrit is forced to capitulate. In 1674, he auctions his "Italian" paintings, and two years later sells the rest of his collection, which includes excellent paintings by Rembrandt, Lastman, van Aelst, Metsu[23], and Hercules Seghers. All of them are authentic beyond any doubt.

Uylenburgh leaves his ungrateful homeland. He departs for England—that is, the place of his great temptation. Thanks to the generosity of an English colleague, he will paint landscape backgrounds for portraits until the end of his life.

Ars alit artificem. Like all golden thoughts and sentences from almanacs, this one should be treated with a proper dose of skepticism. If art indeed nourishes artists, it is a mannered, absentminded, and often completely unpredictable nourisher.

The Dutch painters of the "golden age" undertook all kinds of employment that a contemporary so-called artist would reject as degrading. They were artisans, and their humility toward life was great and beautiful.

Several of the other occupations had something in common with their profession, requiring competence with a brush and knowledge of materials, though these went beyond the frames of paintings. They painted everything: ceilings, pictures on mantelpieces, frontons, they decorated ships, carriages, spinets, clocks, tiles, ceramics, and painted shop signs on order. The good painter Gerrit Berckheyde[24] was christened the Raphael of signboards. A French traveler, Sorbière[25], admired the aesthetic appearance of Dutch shops "dont les enseignes sont quelquefois de fort bons tableaux." Carel

Fabritius[26] patched up his home budget by painting municipal coats of arms at 212 guldens apiece.

Others, the best known painters among them, led a "double" professional life. They were cooks, innkeepers, owners of taverns or brick kilns, petty clerks, traders of works of art, real estate, stockings, tulips, and whatever was at hand.

The smile of fortune, the grace of fate, occurs more often in affluent countries, where everyone quietly counts on it. Gerard Dou, that lucky charmer, received 500 guldens a year from the Swedish envoy in The Hague for the right of purchase alone.

The good reputation of Dutch painters secured invitations to foreign courts, so Godfried Schalcken, Adriaen van der Werff, and Eglon van der Neer[27], for example, spent years in the service of the Prince Elector in Düsseldorf. But the great ones—Vermeer, Hals, Rembrandt—never traveled to the other side of the Alps, or even neighboring countries. They remained faithful to the trees, walls, clouds of their homeland, and to their native towns. What is stranger still, this provincialism by choice constituted their strength, and decided their posthumous triumph.

Lack of stability, the uncertainty of tomorrow were the artists' curse. They tried to remedy it in different ways, and to secure a stable means of existence for some period of time. Only a few succeeded. A highly valued painter, Emmanuel de Witte[28], signed a contract with a notary, Joris de Wijs, giving his entire yearly production in exchange for 800 guldens and room and board. It happened that a rich merchant or collector setting out on a voyage to France or Italy would take an artist with him who for a set sum sketched landscapes, unusual attractions, and town sights.

We have tried to look at the life of seventeenth-century Dutch painters from the banal and not very striking point of view of the balance sheet: "he owes," "he has"—that is, petty bookkeeping. It is better and more honest than the pathos and sentimental sighs favored by authors of *vies romancées* written for tender hearts.

It is true that fate did not spare the members of the Guild of Saint Luke. We know that Hercules Seghers and the seventy-five-year-old Emmanuel de Witte, overwhelmed by material difficulties, committed suicide. Hals, Hobbema, and Ruysdael died in the poorhouse. Poverty and alcoholism occurred often, but not always. The excellent Philips Wouwerman[29] gave his daughter 20,000 guldens as a dowry; the Marinist Jan van de Capelle[30] could rest in peace because he left an estate valued at 100,000 guldens, a splendid collection of two hundred paintings (among others, Rubens, Van Dyck, Rembrandt), and several thousand drawings. It should be added, however, that van de Capelle drew his income to a greater degree from a prospering dye-works than from his painting.

Information preserved about the lives of the Dutch painters is sparse. They belong to that species of artists who leave works behind them, not complaints and laments. Really there are no dramatic stories, unhealthy blushing, or sensational scandals. Their entirely earthly existence can be summarized in a few dates: birth, qualification as a master, marriage, children's baptism, and finally death.

They can only be envied. Whatever their greatness and miseries, the disillusionments and failures of their careers, their role in society and place on earth were not questioned, their profession universally recognized and as evident as the profession of butcher, tailor, or baker. The question why art exists did not occur to anyone, because a world without paintings was simply inconceivable.

It is we who are poor, very poor. A major part of contemporary art declares itself on the side of chaos, gesticulates in a void, or tells the story of its own barren soul.

The old masters—all of them without exception—could repeat after Racine, "We work to please the public." Which means they believed in the purposefulness of their work and the possibility of interhuman communication. They affirmed visible reality with an inspired scrupulousness and childish seriousness, as if the order of the world and the revolution of the stars, the permanence of the firmament, depended on it.

Let such naïveté be praised.

THE BITTER SMELL OF TULIPS

> …galant tulip will hang down his head like to a virgin newly ravished[1]…
>
> —ROBERT HERRICK

1

HERE IS A STORY of human folly.

It is not about fire consuming a great city on a river, nor the slaughter of defenseless people. It is not about a vast plain bathed in morning light where armed riders meet other riders to find out which of the two commanders will earn at the end of the day, after a murderous battle, a modest place in history, a monument of bronze, or, with less luck, give his name to an alleyway in some suburb of poverty.

Our drama is modest and with little pathos, far from the famous hemorrhages of history. Because everything began innocently—with a plant, a flower, a tulip (this is hard to imagine) that unleashed collective, uncontrollable passions. Further, for those who have studied the phenomenon the most amazing thing was that this folly shook a sober, hardworking, and parsimonious nation. The question arises: How did it happen that in enlightened Holland and not somewhere else, *tulpenwoede*—tulipomania—reached such frightening dimensions, shook the foundations of a solid national economy, and drew representatives of all social levels into a gigantic frenzy of gambling?

Some explain it with the proverbial love of the Netherlanders for flowers. An old anecdote recounts that a lady requested an artist to paint a bouquet of rare flowers for her because she could not afford to buy them. This is how a new and so far unknown branch of painting came into being. Let us stress that for this lady, inspirer of a new genre in art, aesthetic motives played a totally secondary role. What she wanted most was a real object: a crown of petals on a green stem. The artist's work was a mere substitute, a shadow of existing things. Similarly, lovers doomed to separation must be content with the likeness of a beloved face. In the beginning the painting expresses nostalgia for a faraway and unreachable lost reality.

There are other reasons, more prosaic and down-to-earth, that sufficiently explain the peculiar Dutch predilection for flowers. Deprived of luxuriant, exuberant vegetation and disciplined by a rational economy, the country amazed many travelers because they found no humming wheat-fields there. Wheat was imported from abroad. There was little land, its quality often poor, while the price was always exorbitant. Most arable land was devoted to pastures, orchards, and gardens. The nature of the country required an intensive economy of land that was spatially restricted.

Nature also challenges man aesthetically, so it is not difficult to understand that a certain monotony of the Dutch landscape gave rise to dreams of multifarious, colorful, and unusual flora. Possibly the nostalgia for a lost paradise lurked behind it, which medieval painters represented in the form of a rosarium, an orchard, or a flower bed. Eternal greenness speaks to the imagination better than eternal light.

In comparison with the pompous splendor of the gardens of French or English lords, the equivalents in Holland were of course modest. Most often they occupied the space of barely several score square feet. But what a wealth of plants, what conscious composition of colors. A lawn with islands of moss and patches of multicolored flowers, lilac bushes and an apple tree, a pattern imposed on all of it and a network of lilliputian paths strewn with white sand.

Everyone, even a simple artisan, wished to own a flower bed at the back of his house and cultivate roses, irises, lilies, and hyacinths that are more beautiful, more unusual than those in his neighbor's garden. This adoration of nature, like an echo of the most remote vegetative cults, had all the attributes of enlightened love. Eminent connoisseurs of the world of plants lectured in Leyden and other universities—for instance the Frenchman Lecluse[2], called Clusius (more about him later on), who founded the first botanical garden in 1587. Scholars set out with colonists on distant, dangerous expeditions to learn the secrets of exotic nature. The public at large avidly read books devoted to the classification, anatomy, and cultivation of plants. The summa of this rich literature is a fat, three-volume work by Jan van der Meurs[3] with the telling title *Arboretum Sacrum*.

In the Mauritshuis in The Hague there is a canvas, "Bouquet against a Vaulted Window," by an excellent painter of flowers, Ambrosius Bosschaert the Elder[4]. This painting always fills me with a kind of anxiety, although I realize its cause is not the subject chosen by the painter. For what is more soothing, more idyllic than an arrangement of roses, dahlias, irises, and orchids presented with sophisticated simplicity against a background of sky and a distant mountainous landscape fading into the blue?

Yet the treatment of the subject is striking and somewhat eerie. The flowers in this painting—quiet servants of nature, and helpless givers of delight—flaunt themselves; they are exclusive sovereigns who domineer with an intensity and force never encountered until then. It seems that an important and decisive act of liberation has occurred here. The "quiet servants of nature" abandon their role of ornament: they do not try to be graceful; they don't languish, but attack the spectator with their proud, one wants to say their self-conscious, individuality. They seem overnatural, insistently present. All of this happens not because they are an expression of violent, internal states of the artist (like Van Gogh's "Sunflowers"), but quite the opposite. The shape, color, and character of the flowers have been reproduced scrupulously, in detail, with the cold impartiality of a botanist and anatomist. The light of the

painting, clear and "objective," means that the artist has abandoned all the charms of chiaroscuro and the painterly hierarchy that plunges some objects in shadow and accentuates others by lighting. The "Bouquet against a Vaulted Window" can be compared to Frans Hals's collective portraits in which there is no division into persons who are more important or less.

Bosschaert's painting was made around 1620, shortly before the artist's death. The events we are about to relate took place several years later. But already in this painting it is possible to notice omens of an approaching storm. For aren't these emancipated, dominating, rapacious flowers, loudly demanding admiration and praise, a symptom of a peculiar cult? The composition of the painting indicates this. The bouquet is placed on a high window as if on an altar, elevated above the rest of nature. A pagan monstrance of flowers.

In Bosschaert's painting—auguring nothing good—are a few tulips.

2

> It is not at all unlikely that illnesses have their history, and every epoch has its own definite sickness which did not occur in such guise before, and will never again return in the same form.
>
> —TROELS-LUND[5]

THE TULIP IS A gift from the East, like so many other blessed and ominous gifts: religions and superstitions, medicinal and intoxicating herbs, holy books and invasions, epidemics and fruit. Its name comes from Persian and designates a turban. For centuries it was a favorite and honored flower in the gardens of Armenia, Turkey, and Persia. At the sultan's courts a tulip holiday was celebrated every year. The poets Omar Khayyam and Hafiz sang its praises, it is mentioned in the tales of The Thousand and One Nights;

before it traveled to Europe it had a long Oriental career of many years behind it.

Its appearance in the West was the contribution of a diplomat. He was Augier Ghislain de Busbecq[6], envoy of the Austrian Hapsburgs at the court of Suleiman the Magnificent in Constantinople. An educated man and curious about the world (his interesting travel descriptions have been preserved), he dutifully wrote comprehensive diplomatic reports. But it seems he had far greater enthusiasm for collecting Greek manuscripts, ancient inscriptions, and naturalia. In 1554 he sent a transport of tulip bulbs to the Viennese court of the Emperor Francis I. Such was the innocent beginning of the evil.

From this time on the flower's popularity spread in Europe with surprising speed. Konrad Gesner[7], called the German Pliny, gave the first scientific description of the plant in his work *De Hortis Germaniae* (1561). In the same year guests of the banker family Fugger admired patches of this still rare flower at their gardens in Augsburg. A little later it appears in France, the Netherlands, and England, where John Tradescant[8], gardener of Charles I, boasted of cultivating fifty varieties of tulip. For a short period gastronomers tried to make a delicacy out of it for elegant tables: in Germany it was eaten with sugar. In England, on the other hand, it was spiced with oil and vinegar. The infamous conspiracy of pharmacists to make a medicine against flatulence from this plant also luckily came to nothing. The tulip remained itself, the poetry of Nature to which vulgar utilitarianism is foreign.

Thus in the beginning it was a flower of monarchs, of the well-born, the wealthy—very precious, carefully kept in gardens, and inaccessible. Contemporaries invented a soul for it; they said it expressed elegance and refined meditation. Even its infirmity—its lack of smell—was interpreted as the virtue of moderation. One could indeed say that cold beauty has an introverted character. The tulip allows us to admire it but does not awaken violent emotions, desire, jealousy, or erotic fervors. It is a peacock among flowers; at any rate, this

is what the courtly “philosophers of gardens” wrote. History proved that they erred.

It is well known that court fashions are contagious; also they are often imitated by the lower classes, and for this they meet a well-deserved divine punishment. In the beginning of the seventeenth century, chroniclers in France observed the first symptoms—let us put it this way—of acute tulip fever. In 1608 a miller parted with his mill for a single bulb of a rarely encountered variety called “Mère brune.” A young groom was supposedly enchanted when his father-in-law gave him a single precious plant as his entire dowry, appropriately called for the occasion “Mariage de ma fille.” Another enthusiast did not hesitate to exchange his flourishing brewery for a bulb, which since that time carries the not very elegant name “Tulipe brasserie.”

One could multiply examples without difficulty to prove that wherever the tulip appeared cases of tulipomania were registered, sometimes more, sometimes less. But only in Holland did it reach the intensity and dimensions of an epidemic.

Its beginnings are unclear and difficult to establish precisely, both in terms of time and of space. With the plague the matter is much simpler: One day a ship from the East puts in at a harbor. Part of the crew has a high fever; some are delirious, and tumors can be seen on their bodies. They go ashore and are put in hospitals, houses, and inns; the first deaths occur, and the number of fatal illnesses rapidly grows. The entire city, the entire region, the entire country is swept by plague. Princes and beggars, saints and freethinkers, criminals and innocent children all die. Since the time of Thucydides this pandemonium of death has been described many times and in detail.

On the other hand, tulipomania is a mental phenomenon, and here the troubles begin. In other words, it is a social psychosis like other psychoses, whether associated with religion, war, revolution, or the economy—for instance, gold fever or the crash of the American stock market in 1929. Despite numerous, striking analogies, it cannot of course be

explained in terms of infectious diseases (but what a pity!). We lack instruments that would allow us to measure quantitatively the range of the epidemic, its degree of "infectiousness," the number with an acute or mild sickness, "the temperature curve" of affected individuals. The only method left is to enter into the spirit of the events, a cautious description that notes both the extreme and characteristic cases.

It is not possible to define exactly when the tulip appeared for the first time in the Netherlands. Most likely it was quite early. We know, for example, that in 1562 a shipment of tulip bulbs was received in the port of Antwerp. But the intensive interest in the flower occurred many years later, most likely reflecting the fashion reigning at the royal courts, especially the French. At the end of the sixteenth century something happened that on the surface seems an unimportant case from police chronicles but in fact was one of the first symptoms of tulipomania on Dutch soil. We have already mentioned Carolus Clusius, professor of botany at the famous university in Leyden (he previously held the rank of Director of the Imperial Gardens in Vienna). This scholar was widely known, at the same time talkative and possibly somewhat vain. At every occasion he talked about the plants he was cultivating, not only to university colleagues but also to chance listeners. Usually he spoke with enthusiasm and unconcealed pride about the tulips, which, he claimed, he would not exchange for any of the world's treasures. It was an open provocation, which the scholar probably did not realize. One night—let us say moonless—unknown persons forced their way into the university gardens and stole Clusius's tulips. The thieves must have had considerable scientific qualifications, because their loot was exclusively the precious and truly rare tulip varieties. The embittered botanist stopped studying this plant till the end of his life.

The story recalls the ballad about the sorcerer's apprentice. A sudden transmutation occurs: the object of patient, scholarly, and therefore disinterested studies is transformed into an object of insane financial transactions. An important question comes to mind here: Why precisely was it the tulip, and not another flower, that liberated the madness?

There were several reasons. We already noted that the tulip was an aristocratic, almost worshipped flower. What a pleasure to possess something that was the pride of monarchs! Aside from snobbish considerations, there were also reasons that might be called purely biological, for the cultivation of a tulip did not involve any large problems or troubles. It was a grateful flower, easy to tame. Everyone who owned even the smallest patch of earth could give himself up to the passion.

In Dutch gardens a certain kind of virus was rife that often caused the petals of the tulip's crown to take on fantastic shapes with ruffled or pleated edges. It was quickly learned how to draw a profit from this pathology.

Finally, and this is particularly important for our thoughts on the scientific basis of tulipomania, no other flower possessed such a quantity of varieties. People were convinced that this plant had a peculiar property: sooner or later it would produce spontaneously—that is, without man's participation—new mutations, and new multicolored forms. It was said nature particularly cherished this flower, and endlessly played with it. To speak in a less ornate way, it meant that the buyer of a tulip bulb was in a situation like a man playing a lottery: blind chance could bestow a large fortune on him.

In the first half of the seventeenth century, the Dutch took pride in three things: a powerful and invincible navy, "the sweets of freedom greater than anywhere else," and—if one may combine important and unimportant matters in a single sentence—at least several hundred varieties of tulips. It seems the dictionary could not keep pace with this wealth of nature. We have simultaneously five kinds of "Miracle," four "Emeralds," as many as thirty "Paragons of Perfection" (a semantic abuse of the word). Those endowed with fantasy invented names full of poetry—"Royal Agate," "Diana," and "Harlequin"—while those deprived of imagination called their specimens simply "Gaudy," "Virgin," or "Yellow-Red." To cope with the growing task, military ranks were introduced and even history was harnessed, so we have "Admiral van Enckhuysen," "General van Eyck," and many others. A certain clever cultivator boldly decided to bid higher, calling his variety "General of Generals." There is, of course, "King,"

“Vice-King,” and “Prince,” as if someone wanted to introduce military and aristocratic order into this multifariousness bordering on chaos.

The huge quantity of tulip varieties that Holland managed to cultivate stirs our admiration and bewilderment, but it contained the seeds of catastrophe as well. If a game uses a small number of cards as a rule it is simple, banal, and quickly ends. However, when the players dispose of let’s say several decks of cards, the field is open to complex combinations, intelligent strategy, a balanced risk, and shrewd methods. The same happened with tulips; one had only to agree which varieties would have the value of an “ace” and which would be counted among “minnows.”

Of course this is a greatly simplified scheme, a first, timid approach to the subject. Ludic elements undoubtedly played a role. But in fact tulipomania was a very complex phenomenon. It seems the most decisive and important aspect of the problem was economic; in other words, the order of the stock market was introduced into the order of nature. The tulip began to lose the properties and charms of a flower: it grew pale, lost its colors and shapes, became an abstraction, a name, a symbol interchangeable with a certain amount of money. Complicated tables existed on which individual varieties were arranged according to the changing market prices like valuable papers or money rates. The hour of the great speculation had struck.

During the entire period of tulipomania, which lasted several years, “Semper Augustus” invariably remained at the top of these price lists, like a sun standing motionless at the zenith. I never personally encountered it. It is vain to look for it in flower shops, which like all our other shops sell standard roses, standard eggs, standard cars. My fault. If I visited botanical gardens as assiduously as museums, the meeting might have occurred. I know this tulip, however, from old, colorful engravings; it is indeed beautiful, thanks to its sophisticated and at the same time simple harmony of colors: petals impeccably white, and with small, fiery, ruby veins running along them, the bottom of the chalice blue like the reflection of a sunny sky. It is an exceptionally nice specimen, but the price reached by “Semper Augustus,” 5,000 florins (the

equivalent of a house with a large garden), causes a shiver of anxiety. The dikes of common sense had broken. From now on we will move on the slippery terrain of unhealthy fantasy, feverish desire for profit, insane illusions, and bitter disappointments.

Transactions were often made in kind. These allow us to measure the dimensions of the madness even better. For a bulb of the tulip "Vice-King" (it was worth half the value of "Semper Augustus"), the following was paid in the form of farm products:

2 carts of wheat

4 carts of rye

4 fat oxen

8 fat pigs

12 fat sheep

2 barrels of wine

4 barrels of the foremost beer

1,000 pounds of cheese

A bed, clothes, and a silver chalice were added to this drink, food, and fatness.

In the initial phase of tulipomania, prices went constantly up. As stockbrokers would say, the trend on the "flower stock market" was at first "friendly," then "lively," all the way to "very lively," to pass in the end to a state of euphoria completely uncontrolled by common sense.

A greater and greater gap opened between the real value of the plants sold and the price paid for them. It was paid willingly, with joy, as if expecting the smile of fate. Most of those touched by tulipomania counted on a boom; they were convinced the rising trend would continue forever (don't they resemble the progressives?), and that a bulb bought today would double its value tomorrow or at the latest the day after

tomorrow. If one treats these fantastic speculations seriously and without irony (because "seniority" in history does not entitle one to it), we can see something more profound—for instance, the old myth of humanity about miraculous multiplication.

In earthly categories the matter looked as follows: the sellers took no account at all of the actual possibilities of the buyers, and what is worse the buyers seemed to have entirely lost the instinct of self-preservation. They were no longer aware of their own possibilities. The hectic atmosphere that accompanies large stock operations is universally known, but in the case of tulipomania it was something more serious and more pathological than an "atmosphere."

The psychological deviations defined as manias possess certain common features. The persons affected by the disease have a tendency to create imaginary, autonomous worlds governed by their own rules. In our case it was like a gigantic flower lottery, and all those who played expected the first prize. The game, however, did not take place on an island especially leased for the purpose, but in a country where the cardinal virtues were caution, moderation, and accountability. A system based on bourgeois calculation could not coexist with a system of financial phantasmagoria. The collison of the world of desires with everyday reality was inevitable, and as is usual in such cases, painful.

It is worthwhile now to ponder in what way, in what places, and in what social framework the speculation in tulip bulbs took place. The answer closest to the truth would be: on the margin of normal economic life, in its dark corners, so to say. Several times we have mentioned the stock market, but this should not be taken literally. There never was and there could not be an official tulip stock market, because this institution assumes openness, admits a limited number of those authorized to take part, and the results of transactions are announced to all who are interested.

On the other hand, we know the wild commerce in tulips caused the authorities to be seriously worried and alarmed. Orders were given to limit and curb, if not eliminate, this

dangerous social phenomenon. But these did not help much; strictly speaking their effect was the opposite of what was intended. The elements cannot be calmed by gentle persuasion.

The country lived in fever. Whoever remembers war knows very well that the most fantastic, unverified information is capable of pulling people from the bottom of despair and transporting them to towering heights of optimism, of illusory hopes. A similar thing happened in our case. News of sudden fortunes achieved because of the tulips spread with the speed of lightning. A citizen of Amsterdam who owned a small garden earned 60,000 florins in four months, a wealth not dreamed of by an average merchant even at the end of a laborious life. An Englishman who knew nothing about flowers managed to make five thousand pounds by ingenious speculations. One had to have a stoic character indeed to resist these temptations.

Because the whole procedure was unofficial and even had the character of a forbidden game, it became more attractive for precisely this reason, drawing ever new participants. It was like a period of prohibition when those with only a moderate liking for intoxicants manifest their freedom by excessive consumption of alcohol.

There are of course no statistics that show how many people were touched by tulipomania. But it is possible, even probable, that they numbered in the tens of thousands. What is particularly important, they cannot be assigned to any single, specific social group. Among them were the wealthy and the poor, merchants and weavers, butchers and students, painters and peasants, peat diggers and poets, city clerks and junk dealers, sailors and virtuous widows, persons generally respected and criminals. Even the followers of all twenty or more religious denominations took unanimous part in this race for fortune.

The poor risked most of all—the poor risked everything. When we read that a criminal drawn into the whirlpool of speculations pawned his tools, we realize the full horror of the situation. Preachers thundered from their pulpits against

wicked tulipomania, but the malicious maintained that they slipped away to other cities where they could succumb to the sinful craze without unwanted witnesses.

But never mind the pastors. They will always find some excuse at the Last Judgment. What is worse, or frankly disgraceful, is that children were drawn into the action. Success in the game required among other things collecting the greatest possible amount of information—prices, places of transaction, fluctuations of the market. In simple language, to know which tulip bulbs the neighbor hid under his jacket and for how much he sold them in the tavern At the Braying Donkey, all of it had to be found out by a teenager performing the vile function of spy.

Fever, raving, and sleeplessness. Sleeplessness, because many tulip transactions were sealed at night. Active participation in speculating often swallowed up many hours of the day, and could not be combined with other more productive occupations. Those who cultivated tulips lived like misers in a sack of gold. Ingenious systems of alarm bells were installed in gardens to rouse the owner to his feet if an uninvited guest approached his patch.

The epidemic character of tulipomania explains its enormous geographic range. It touched not only the traditional garden districts—for instance the regions of Haarlem, but also Amsterdam, Alkmaar, Hoorn, Enkhuizen, Utrecht, Rotterdam —that is, all the greater conglomerations in Holland. It is precisely there that the number of victims was the highest. The bacillus of tulipomania was everywhere in the air, and threatened everyone. How much easier it is to dispose of a visible enemy: the gates of the city are closed, the brave defenders go out onto the walls…

But after all, something exists that we call the power of reason, and it is an effective weapon (not always) against unbridled irrational powers. We know that Holland was a country of people who liked to read, with wise authors, educated book-sellers, and enlightened publishers. Actual problems would meet a response in print very quickly; this was true not only of serious political and religious disputes.

The affair of tulipomania, whose dimensions awoke understandable anxiety, also met with decisive resistance and protests from sober citizens. But the country was liberal; public opinion differentiated. Together with voices of reason, pamphlets appeared that were practical introductions to the principles of tulip speculation, prolegomena to insanity: teach-yourself manuals on how to become a madman.

In all of it there was a method, and even a ritual. One author recommended that if someone succeeded in cultivating an unknown variety of tulip he should act as follows: immediately go to a professional gardener (time presses, because someone else might have managed a similar trick), not alone but accompanied by acquaintances, friends, even persons encountered by chance. The goal was evident: to give the greatest possible publicity to the event. A council took place at the gardener's, each person present expressing his opinion about the botanical revelation—exactly like high church councils preoccupied with the problems of real and imaginary miracles.

Now a very important step followed. We could call it comparative: the consideration of the new variety side by side with others that were already known. If it showed similarity to some famous "Admiral" but was less beautiful, it should be modestly called "General." This ritual of baptism was incredibly important. The tulip became a personality, or to speak less grandiloquently and use stock-market terminology, a value admitted into circulation. In the end it was proper to offer a fine wine to all those present, because it was up to them to spread the news about the birth of a new variety, to praise its graces.

Transactions with tulip bulbs would take place in the fumes of beer, gin, and lamb, in restaurants, inns, and taverns. Some of them had rooms specially designated for this purpose; they were a kind of club, or branches of a huge and well-concealed stock market. The fight for each precious variety of tulip must have been fierce. If several buyers competed for it, the one who wanted to outbid others would add to an already excessive price a carriage with a pair of horses.

The entire country was covered by a network of more or less known, secret, or almost open gambling "dens" for tulips. It did not involve any demonic power but the simple rule of every "big game," every powerful addiction—to draw in and entrap the greatest possible number of people. Because madness cannot be logically justified, it is necessary to have strong statistics in one's defense. This is what everybody does, or almost everybody, including politicians: to eliminate or substantially decrease the number of those who stand aside, who look on or observe critically and spoil the game. The world of tulipomaniacs strove to become a total world.

How did it happen in practice? A document exists, literary to be sure but trustworthy, which provides precious information about the means of capturing new enthusiasts. A dialogue takes place between two friends. The first, Pieter, is an expert speculator; the second, Jan, plays the role of a novice in this conversation:

PIETER: I like you very much. This is why I want to propose to you this advantageous transaction. I do it without any self-interest, and out of pure friendship.

JAN: I am listening carefully, my dear friend.

PIETER: I have a bulb of the tulip "Harlequin." It is a very beautiful variety, and in addition much sought after on the market.

JAN: But I never had anything to do with flowers in my whole life. I don't even have a garden.

PIETER: You don't understand a thing. Please listen to me; don't interrupt because who knows, maybe today a great fortune is knocking at your door. Can I go on?

JAN: Yes, yes, of course.

PIETER: Well, the "Harlequin" bulb is worth a hundred florins, and maybe even more. In the name of our unblemished (as I said) friendship, I will let you have it for fifty florins. Still today, without any effort, you can make quite a lot of money.

JAN: This is indeed a splendid proposition. Nothing like this has ever happened to me before. Only tell me, please, what am I to do with this “Harlequin”? After all, I will not stand at the street corner…

PIETER: I will tell you the whole secret. But note it down well in your memory. Why are you fidgeting?

JAN: I am listening, only I am a bit dizzy.

PIETER: Do exactly as I say. Go to the inn At the Lion. Ask the innkeeper where the tulip vendors meet. You will enter the room he indicates. Then someone will say in a very thick voice (but don’t you be put off by it): “A stranger has come in.” In answer to that, cluck like a chicken. From that moment on you will be included in the community of vendors.

May God protect Jan’s Calvinist soul! We part with him on the threshold of farce and a step away from tragedy. Darkness covers his future fate. It is not even known whether he managed to cluck in an appropriate and persuasive manner at the decisive moment. On the basis of this tale there is little hope he would become a shark of the tulip stock market. It seems he was assigned the role of victim.

One more detail merits our attention. This introduction to the trade of the tulipomaniacs reminds us of patterns known from other areas. Keeping all proportions in mind, it recalls the ritual of initiation. Of course the Masonic lodges arranged it with greater pomp and better knowledge of esoteric science.

Mania is an elevated state of mind. Those who have not experienced it at least once are the poorer for it. Besides, in certain conditions it brings advantages. An ordinary man who was unknown to anyone—he was neither a poet nor painter nor statesman—recalled with genuine sentiment the times of the tulipomania. His name was Waermondt[9]; he held office always in the same tavern, and his function was that of broker. Between one transaction and another, “I ate fried meat and fish, chicken and hare, even delicate pâtés. I also drank wine

and beer from early morning till three or four at night. I always carried more money away at night than I had at the beginning of the day." A true Shlarafia[10], land of laziness and plenty.

3

> *"La maladie infectueuse tend à la fois à se perpétuer et, pour assurer cette perpétuité, à se modifier suivant les circonstances[11]."*
>
> —CHARLES NICOLLE

THE GREATEST INTENSITY OF tulipomania fell during the years 1634 to 1637. The great crash took place in the winter of 1637—the whole imaginary world fell apart. If someone managed to reproduce "the curve of the tulip fever," it would closely resemble the temperature chart of a patient with a serious infectious disease. The line rises fast, continues for some time on a very high level, and at the end falls rapidly.

A question comes to mind, however: What fate, or implacable logic of events, caused it to happen exactly in the winter of 1637? There are many answers.

Some believe that the victory over the tulip epidemic was the merit of the healthy portion of Dutch society. It created a sanitary belt that blocked the spread of the illness. There were those who actively opposed tulipomania; the opposition must have been quite strong since a number of brochures, magazines, pamphlets, satires, and cartoons from those times —they have been preserved until today—pitilessly make fun of the unfortunate maniacs. In colloquial language they were called "the hooded ones" or madmen; in those times the mentally ill wore hoods drawn over their faces, a peculiar device for "visual" protection of the healthy part of the nation.

Henry Pot[12], a painter of collective portraits, religious and genre pictures, represented the mania afflicting his country under a veil of transparent allegory in his work "The Cart of

Madmen.” On this cart we recognize Flora holding in her hand three of the most precious varieties of tulip: “Semper Augustus,” “General Bol,” and “Admiral Hoorn.” Behind the patron of nature there are five symbolic figures: Good-for-Nothing, Wealth-Craver, the Drunkard, and two ladies, Vain Hope and Poverty. A huge crowd of people runs after the cart calling, “We too want to sell our tulips.”

A countless number of stories, anecdotes, and jokes show that tulipomania was answered with a decided tulipophobia, an unrelenting hostility to what was, after all, an innocent plant. In fact it deserved neither frantic adoration nor boundless spite, but we are speaking of times rocked by passions. It was said that a professor of Leyden University, Fortius[13], not a theologian but a professor of botany, attacked a tulip whenever he saw one, destroying it with his cane. In this unrefined manner he transformed himself from scholar into inquisitor and moralist.

Fortius’s cane did not possess magic power, and even the most vicious pamphlets could not tame the insanity. Some maintain that the mortal blow to tulipomania was dealt by the authorities, with their wise orders and decrees. They realized the situation was serious and could not be looked at passively, because limitless speculation threatens the foundations of a national economy.

A number of institutions, from the florists’ guild all the way up to the Estates General, or parliament, decided to oppose the folly. Instructions and resolutions poured from them, at first hesitant and inefficient but continuing all the way to the drastic decree of the Estates in April 1637, that annulled all speculative agreements and established a maximum value for a tulip bulb. It was 50 florins. “Semper Augustus” was now worth one-hundredth of its recent market price. This happened quickly and unexpectedly, like a palace revolution, like the dethronement of an emperor.

The authorities’ efforts to overcome tulipomania, their concern about the fate and wealth of the citizens, are worthy of praise and of course should be fully appreciated. It seems, however, that the majority of scholars are mistaken when they

ascribe to them a decisive role. We know from experience that all bans and prohibitions in cases of acute narcomania bring results that are the opposite of those intended. Ever since Paradise, the fruit that is forbidden is the most desired.

The decision of the Estates General was made late, very late, when the mania was already dying out. It was, therefore, a council gathered at the bed of a patient who was hopelessly ill, or to use an expression taken from the lexicon of tauromachy a coup de grâce. Indeed, nothing could be saved any longer.

In our opinion, tulipomania was killed by its own madness. Proofs supporting the thesis are provided by an analysis of the changing moods of the tulip market. In the period of euphoria the profits of the speculators were huge; however, they were not always expressed in negotiable currency or liquid money, but in credit. The owner of the variety "Semper Augustus" was universally considered to be a wealthy man; consequently he could borrow large amounts, and this is what he did most of the time. The crazy turnover of the market became more and more abstract. What was sold was no longer the bulbs (their value was absolutely arbitrary, further and further removed from reality and common sense), but the names of bulbs. Like shares, they often changed owners ten times a day.

Prices rose. It was expected that they would grow endlessly, because such is the logic of mania. A large number of the wary accumulated "values" in order to throw them on the market at the most propitious moment. It was precisely these cautious ones—as usually happens with greedy people entangled in the nets of gambling—who suffered the most painful defeat. Faith in the bright future of tulipomania broke down already in 1636. The edifice of trust and rampant illusions caved in. The supply of tulips was larger and larger, the demand frightfully diminishing; at the end everyone wanted to sell, but there were no bold risk takers any longer. Henry Pot represented this phase of tulipomania accurately: the desperate cry of the crowd running after Flora's vehicle becomes quite clear in this context.

Thus the crisis had far outpaced the intervention of the authorities. On the third of January 1637, four months before the decree of the Estates General, an Amsterdam gardener bought a precious tulip bulb for a bargain price of 1,250 florins. At first happy, he soon found that he could not sell it for even half or even one-tenth of his own cost. For a sharp drop had now begun, and the game was not to make money but lose as little as possible. The entire story of this unfortunate affair extends between two poles—a long, desperate assault upon fortune, and a sudden wild panic.

We are parting thus with tulipomania, and it is a separation full of tears, curses, and moans. The statement that it could not have happened otherwise is small consolation for the victims.

What was the outcome? Because everything took place secretly, on the margins—in dark corridors and in the underground of official life—it is difficult to evaluate the dimensions of the catastrophe in measurable terms. But the outcome was without any doubt tragic: thousands of ruined estates, tens of thousands of people without work and, in addition, threatened by trials. Bankruptcy was punished, as a rule, with severe prison sentences. There were legions who had lightheartedly gone into debt. Finally—no statistics account for it—a long list of innocent families deprived of means of existence, children doomed to poverty or public charity, broken careers, destroyed reputations and dignity. The bankrupts did not have many ways out: joining the merchant marine and navy, which required certain qualifications, or begging, which did not require any special talents.

It does not need to be argued that it was an “exclusively” bourgeois tragedy. But the scale of the passions of the flower speculators equaled the scale of a heroic tenor in an opera. The aria of the stockbrokers was loud and trivial, that is evident. If we are to drag this theatrical analogy out by the hair even further, it was played without sword or blood, even without poison. Why on earth, then, does it move the imagination?

Throughout all the periods of tulipomania, not only during its fatal epilogue but during the days of its victorious euphoria, small and great human dramas were occurring. Among the

many that memory has preserved we select one, a theme that might be taken straight from Chekhov's stories.

The union of florists in Haarlem became alarmed by sensational news that gripped everyone with feverish excitement: a poor, unknown shoemaker from The Hague was growing an unusual variety of tulip called "Black Tulip." It was decided to act immediately—that is, to check the matter on the spot and as far as possible to obtain the specimen. Five gentlemen dressed in black entered the dark cubbyhole of the shoemaker. They began commercial negotiations—very strange negotiations, because the gentlemen from Haarlem were playing the role of benefactors. Supposedly they had come there out of pure philanthropy to help the poor artisan, but at the same time they were unable to conceal how much they cared to possess the "Black Tulip." The master of last and leather took in the situation, and tried to get the highest price. After much haggling a transaction finally took place: 1,500 florins, not a trifling sum. A moment of happiness for the poor shoemaker.

Now something unexpected happened, something that in drama is called a turning point. The merchants threw down the bulb bought at such a high price and in fury trampled it to a pulp. "You idiot"—they shouted at the stupefied shoepatcher —"we also have a bulb of the 'Black Tulip.' Besides us, no one else in the world! No king, no emperor or sultan. If you had asked ten thousand florins for your bulb and a couple of horses on top of it, we would have paid without a word. And remember this. Good fortune won't smile on you a second time in your entire life, because you are a blockhead." They left. The shoemaker staggered, dragged himself to his attic, lay down on his bed and, covering himself with his coat, breathed his last breath.

TULIPOMANIA—THE MOST EXTRAORDINARY botanical folly we know—was an episode inscribed on the margin of Great History. We have chosen it not without reason. It should be honestly confessed: we have a strange

liking for presenting follies in the sanctuaries of reason, and we also like to study catastrophes against a gentle landscape. There are reasons more important than frivolous personal or aesthetic inclinations, however. For doesn't the affair we have described remind us of other, more dangerous follies of humanity that consist in the irrational attachment to a single idea, a single symbol, or a single formula for happiness?

This is why we cannot put a large period after the date 1637 and consider the matter definitively closed. It is not reasonable to erase it from memory, or count it among the inconceivable fads of the past. If tulipomania was a kind of psychological epidemic, and this is what we believe, the probability exists—bordering on certainty—that one day it will afflict us again in this or another form.

In some Far Eastern port it is getting ready for the journey.

GERARD TERBORCH: THE DISCREET CHARM OF THE BOURGEOISIE

I am sending you a human figure for your studies to become a painter. It has no pedestal because it was too heavy and too large to fit in the chest; you can have one made for a small sum of money. Use this figure, don't allow it to stand idle as it was here but draw assiduously, especially those large, animated human groups for which Pieter de Molyn[1] liked your work so much. If you paint, paint contemporary things, scenes from life, they can be done the most quickly. Be tenacious so you complete the paintings you have started; you will be loved for them, with God's help, just as you were loved in Haarlem and Amsterdam. Whatever you start in the Lord's name will always bring you luck. Serve God above all, be modest and polite toward every man, in this way you will assure your success. I am enclosing also clothes, long brushes, paper, chalk, and all the beautiful paints…

This letter, in which elevated and everyday matters mix so naturally, moral teachings as well as painter's accessories, was written in 1635 by Terborch the father from the small town of Zwolle to his seventeen-year-old son Gerard, who was staying at the time in London. Among the sparse, gray materials for biographies of Dutch artists, this is an exceptional document: it preserves the warmth and the glow of a sunny day.

If we may use two old-fashioned expressions in one sentence, we would say he was born under a lucky star and was a child wonder in addition. Well-to-do, his career had no

heavy blows, dramas, or crises. His talent developed very early: the preserved drawings of the eight-year-old boy are not only amazingly mature but show the discovery of his own artistic form, his own style. He learned the profession with his father, who was an able draftsman, then with Pieter de Molyn mentioned in the letter. He was seventeen years old when he became a qualified painter included among members of the guild.

In the usual course of events such a promising young artist would now settle down, open an atelier, take in disciples, and begin a family. Terborch junior traveled. His years of wandering were extensive: England, Italy, Spain (where apparently he painted the portrait of Philip IV), France, Flanders, and Germany. He was almost forty years old when after mature reflection he married, settled in the small northern town of Deventer, far from the artistic centers, amid the harmonious clan of Terborchs who bestowed on him their respect and love. He was not only a well-known painter, but what is more important also held the post of City Councillor.

The peak event of his artistic career was a trip to Muenster together with a Dutch delegation conducting peace negotiations with Spain. These were concluded with the signing of a treaty in 1648 that ended eighty years of struggle. It is difficult to overestimate the importance of this event. Terborch recorded the ceremonial moment of the treaty oath.

It is a very peculiar work. Painted on tin, with the dimensions 45 by 58 centimeters, the artist crowded onto this small surface fifty or even as some scholarly sources claim seventy figures of secretaries, high officials, plenipotentiaries and diplomats, not forgetting himself. The whole gives the impression of a rather monotonous, frozen, posed group of people, and the painter, realizing this, tried to breathe life into it by showing some faces in profile and others *en face*, as well as several hands timidly stretched out in the gesture of an oath. The work is not very attractive coloristically: on the left side of the painting a man in a bright red cape, on the right side a young man like an insect, dressed in the golden scales of a sumptuous costume. In the middle, a table covered by fabric that is green verging on black, and on top of it the vermilion

cover of a Bible. A lazy light with no luster falls through the window. The painting always makes the impression on me of a ceremony opening a World Congress of Insects. I think I could define some of the species.

I realize I am allowing myself to write blasphemies, because “Swearing of the Oath of Ratification of the Treaty of Muenster,” according to general opinion, is a masterpiece. Critics have even seen in the faces of the diplomats (not larger than a fingernail) the struggle of contradictory feelings, fear and hope, joy and depression. I think only that this is not Terborch’s best painting, but a very characteristic example of the particularity of Dutch painting. Every pupil of Rubens, Velazquez, or the Italians would set this scene in motion by filling it with noise, color, pathos, hyperbole (because everything has to be made bigger and more splendid), and fill the empty spots under the ceiling with antique gods or archangels blowing their trumpets. Terborch paints his historical work without pathos, in a neutral way as if it were a genre scene that could be imagined more easily on the walls of a middle-class room with a fireplace than in a gala room of a city hall. It is a painting-record, and now we know how it really was. Only in one domain did the painter turn out to be a fantast of unbridled imagination—namely, he requested such a horrendous price for the work that until the end of his life he could not find a buyer.

It seems that for some time Terborch nourished the illusion that he was able to paint lucrative group portraits. Soon after “Swearing of the Oath” he painted “Family against a Landscape” this picture causes a sudden influx of warm humor, and recalls a canvas painted three centuries later, the “Artillerymen” of the Douanier Rousseau[2]. The mustached soldiers pose as if for a souvenir picture, looking alike as two drops of water, as two buttons of a uniform. Behind them an extremely long cannon barrel seems cast not in metal but heavy dream. In Terborch a group of old men, adults, young people, and children emerges black and foreign, stiff, festive as a colony of mushrooms from the juicy greenness of a ravine.

When I look at Terborch's paintings the impression never leaves me that they are the works of two harmoniously collaborating brothers, a painter and a miniaturist. The silhouettes of the figures emerging from darkness are invariably precise. The strokes of the brush are short, the hand's motion restrained, slow, delicate, without effusion or blurred contours; an attempt to tell the world in a black, pearl-like, and gray tonality.

Terborch stayed in Muenster three long years, and during this time executed a number of portrait studies getting ready, so he thought, for his *magnum opus*. Not many of these sketches and studies remain—so much the more surprising are two excellent miniatures, as if a few measures of an overture moved an entire laboriously composed opera into the shadow.

The first is a portrait of a Spanish aristocrat, at the head of the delegation to the peace negotiations, who carried the sonorous name Don Caspar de Bramante y Guzman Conde de Peneranda. Terborch became so attached to the Spanish diplomat that he placed himself on the side of the "eternal enemies" of his country in the scene of "Swearing of the Oath," and his colleagues pointed out his tactlessness. But the portrait of Conde de Peneranda is excellent. It seems as if the waves of changing moods run through his face: melancholy and serenity, disappointment and tides of energy. A splendid high forehead, sharp pitch-black eyes, and a long, thin, narrow nose like the beak of a sad parrot. A small close-cropped beard, a mustache turned up by a barber's artifice like two sharp hooks. On his neck, like the swish of a sword, a thin cambric collar with the sharp points called *gollilla*. He is dressed in ceremonious court costume, a cape embroidered with gold. Rarely does Terborch give such proof of coloristic virtuosity: dark violet, gold, intensive red juxtaposed against gray and black.

The miniature portrait of the youngest member of the Dutch delegation, Kaspar van Kinschot[3], is of an entirely different character. He is dressed in a light coat with pale blue and white stripes. His girlish face is encircled by thick hair falling to the shoulders, his big eyes are full of gentle resignation. Poor Kaspar died soon after the signing of the

treaty, plunging his native palestra in sorrow as well as the muses, for he was the author of fairly deft Latin poems.

Terborch entered art history as a painter of genre themes and a portraitist. He practiced portrait painting with success, most likely owing much to contacts made in Muenster; the numerous trips from quiet Deventer to Amsterdam. The Hague, Haarlem, and other cities are proof of this. Near the end of his life he received from Prince Cosimo de' Medici III a prestigious order for a life-sized self-portrait with one of his favorite paintings in his hand. Cosimo wanted to create a whole gallery of similar works, "a painting within a painting." Other painters were invited, such as Dou and van Mieris, who were popular in France and Italy, and they executed the order quickly. Terborch, on the other hand, delayed, was fussy, grumbled, and wrote that the sum of 500 guldens was decidedly too low. He needed at least four months to execute the "portrait with a picture," putting aside other urgent orders, he was now very busy, and so on. No contemporary painters and few of their descendants possessed to such a degree a business acumen based on two firm principles: never to go below the honorarium designated by the painter, and to value yourself highly in order to be valued by others.

Terborch was an unsurpassed painter of children (his house swarmed with models). The majority of artists painted children as chubby cherubs, or dolls clothed in costumes modeled on those of adults, creatures deprived of their own life and personality—chrysalises looking at us with idiotic expression, or larvae, unfinished dwarfish forms of the human species.

Look at "The Lesson," a painting in the Louvre: a bent head of a boy with thick red hair falling on his forehead like a fur cap emerges from a dark background. We do not see either books or school supplies, yet we know that this silent, concentrated boy is studying the secrets of arithmetic. His mother, seen in profile and indifferent to her son's efforts, looks into the distance as if she wanted to guess his future fate. I have invented all this unnecessary anecdote to motivate these two heads against the heavy, dark background—heads that have nothing in common either from the painterly or compositional point of view.

The “Boy Cleaning His Dog’s Coat” in Munich’s Alte Pinakothek: a corner of a room, next to the wall a small table with books and school materials, parallel to the lower frame of the painting a bench (Terborch acknowledged only closed, delimited spaces), on the bench an old hat with a large brim. In the middle of this modest scenery a boy sitting on a low stool with a dog on his knees. His agile fingers move along the skin of the animal. The boy applies himself to this activity with tense concentration, with the exclusiveness and total application only children are capable of. Those who “read paintings” cannot agree whether it is in praise of cleanliness or a reproach for preferring unimportant activities to school duties. (Here is an example of the intellectual games of bored elderly gentlemen.) What enchanted me always in this painting were its gentle, noble colors: the toned-down olive-green of the walls, the ochre of the objects, and only two more lively accents, the blue pants of the boy, and the dog’s brown and white fur.

Whenever I am in Amsterdam I visit and spend a few moments chatting with Helena van der Schalke, a resolute three-year-old girl with dark eyes and small, very red lips. She is in a white dress, a woman’s white bonnet, and a white, flaring, wide skirt down to the ground. A basket trimmed in black hangs on a black ribbon from her right arm, which is bent at the elbow. This very basket, inclining backward, destroys the static perpendicular axis of the composition: whirling movement, restlessness. For indeed Helen appears here only for a moment: she looks at us with curiosity and anxiety, she will immediately run away to her inconceivable childish worlds.

The psychological inquisitiveness of the painter bordered on prophesying the future, because when he painted the twelve-year-old son of William III of Orange, Henry Casimir van Nassau-Dietz, he represented a young man with a long face and not a single trace of grace, with small drilling eyes and tight lips. Indeed, the prince grew up to be a man of difficult character, to speak delicately.

Terborch created his own type of portrait, fundamentally different from that of Hals, Rembrandt, and other masters of

the period, and with his own inimitable style. He strove for an almost extreme reduction of painterly means. He substituted a play of colors with a broad scale of grayness, and built a static, cohesive form. Usually he painted an entire figure standing against a dark wall, dressed in a thick woolen cape loosely falling from the shoulders, a frock coat, trousers down to the knees, pearly gray stockings, and elegant low shoes clasped with a buckle, the right one placed forward and the left arranged perpendicular to the lower frame of the painting, endowing the figures—even those markedly corpulent—with an almost dancelike grace. The entire composition could be compared to a spindle or two cones connected at their bases. On the basis of what was said about him, one might judge that Terborch was an engraver who for some unknown reason used oil paints. When seen from a distance the background of the painting "Portrait of a Man" in the Louvre has a dull tone, *noir d'ivoire*[4]. Looking closer we notice irregular stripes of deep juicy browns. The background becomes differentiated and sonorous.

With few exceptions the persons portrayed by Terborch who face the spectator stand in an empty space without doors, windows, or furniture. Only occasionally an ordinary chair or table appears, and there is only enough light to show faces, hands, and the white accessories of their dress.

Who ordered these unattractive canvases? We know the Dutch loved objects, the wordly reward for industriousness and saving. The ship owner would be portrayed against a window through which all of his ships could be seen. Gabriel Metsu paints a splendid fat man sprawled out in an armchair surrounded by his wife, children, servants, and his paintings hanging on the walls; the open door with a stone portal leads to further splendors. Terborch's clients—regents and patricians—despised such ostentatiousness. They are found in his paintings without the insignia of office, without proofs of affluence. The master painted them delicately but surely standing on the ground, combining the intimate and monumental in these portraits, ease and hieratic posture, the ceremonial and the everyday. This is how they have come

down to our days, these very conservative representatives of Calvinist virtues and archetypal accumulation of capital.

Terborch's genre paintings do not overstep the thematic range of Dutch painting—military scenes, mothers combing children, a few persons giving a concert in an elegant interior, a suitor playing an instrument, and a lady—but almost always they contain an element of distance, irony, and discreetly concealed ambiguity. In Kassel, which has a very decent museum, we find Terborch's painting representing a lonely woman playing the lute. Most likely it was Gesina, Gerard's favorite sister and model, an unmarried, talented woman whose rounded forehead and upturned nose we encounter in many of the master's paintings. A duet of a man and a lady signified, as a rule, a prelude to a love game. Then what does this portrait mean—a lonely woman in a white dress and satin doublet with a golden sheen, lined with white fur? In her artfully arranged light hair there are four short vermilion ribbons. The painter caught the moment of indecision, anxiety: she is bent forward with eyes fixed on the musical score as if looking for a lost note or chord in the bushel of other notes. We do not know for whom this lady is playing—is it a lament for someone who has gone, or the lure of a nightingale?

Terborch was a peculiar colorist. He avoided what we call the building of form with color. Muted browns, ochres, and grays prevail in his reticent paintings; against these backgrounds a dress suddenly explodes in shades of ultramarine, luminous yellows, cinnabar red.

The seventeenth century was an epistolary century. The postal service started to function almost as well as in Roman times, many Dutchmen were on the sea or in colonies, the literary culture of the middle class was high; therefore, conditions were favorable for a lively exchange of correspondence. Those who did not know how to express their feelings artfully had different aids at their disposal; a manual, *Le secrétaire à la mode* by Jean Puget de la Serra[5], appeared in Amsterdam and by the middle of the century had already been through nineteen editions. Characteristic in this manual is the distinct division of roles. Gentlemen were allowed to reveal

stormy feelings and an abyss of melancholy; ladies charmed with the soothing depth of lakes.

He: “Since your departure I lead a life sad beyond words. I confess I have lost appetite and peace; I spend entire days without food and nights without sleep.” She: “If I could only soothe the suffering caused by my absence you would see me in person instead of this letter. But I remain in the custody of my mother and father, and I don’t have enough freedom even to write you.” Then words of consolation follow, and a veiled hope of a meeting.

In Dutch painting the theme of the letter was extremely popular. Formally it is simply a portrait, always of a female, a girl or a woman who puts down the letter or else reads from a piece of paper. For us this does not contain anything extraordinary: a simple monodrama played by one actress with a single prop. For the Dutch of the seventeenth century this kind of painting was particularly exciting, because the piece of paper was not, after all, an object emotionally indifferent like a mug or ball of yarn. As a rule, the women represented in these paintings are reading love letters. Thus we are looking at an intimate scene, intruders in a dialogue with an absentee, but we will never learn the reproaches, complaints, or confessions. The words, conceived in solitude, read in silence, are enclosed by the solemn silence of the painting as if with a seal.

Terborch paints “Young Lady Writing a Letter” (in The Hague) against a background of a bed’s dark red curtains arranged in the shape of a tent. On the table, disorder—inkstands, a sheaf of papers, a colorful cloth in brick-brown, pearl-gray, and blue patterns hurriedly pushed aside. The girl, shown in profile, is dressed in a jacket that has a lively orange, luminous tinge. Amid the disquiet of the objects and colors, her face does not express any emotion. She recalls, rather, a student scrupulously doing her homework. Similarly, “Lady Reading a Letter” in the Metropolitan Museum is dressed in a deep funereal black, and even in her light hair there is a black lace scarf. She has a beautiful young alabaster face without a shade of sadness, without a wrinkle of worry. She reads the letter (perhaps an offer of marriage, since widows were highly

valued on the Dutch matrimonial market) with the sober objectivity of a notary.

Sometimes, however, Terborch has pity for our curiosity and sinful habit of peeking. The "Woman Reading" in the London Wallace Collection does not conceal her feelings. All-absorbed in reading a letter, she smiles at the piece of paper held in her hand, which emanates warmth and light. Her face is blissful, as if she found in the letter all the long-expected words and entreaties. In the Alte Pinakothek in Munich there is a painting by Terborch that has the content of the letter written out for different voices: a military courier enters the room dressed in a long brown coat decorated with black stripes—a beautiful Braque-like juxtaposition—and a trumpet on his shoulder, a lady with a white bonnet on her head is clearly interrupted in her morning toilet, and in addition a servant girl looks at the scene with indescribable amazement. The courier holds a letter in his outstretched hand; the mistress's face expresses a spiteful coldness, and she has crossed her hands on her chest in a pathetic gesture signifying rejection, a rebuff, and a final break in the relationship. It would move one to tears if the toilette were not in the way: it is difficult to play a heroine in morning attire, or Penelope in pajamas.

The "Fatherly Admonition" in Berlin's Dahlem Museum is my favorite Terborch, one might say the fullest Terborch at the peak of his painterly potentiality: the enclosed fragment of an elegant room (its box conception of space brings to mind the dramas of Ibsen and nineteenth-century naturalists). Against deep browns the screen of a bed with a baldachin and a curtain falling perpendicularly like a backdrop with a matte red shade. The same color, only gradually more intensive and saturated with light, is repeated in the coverlet on the table and upholstery of a chair. Three persons are in the room. A young soldier seen in profile, his leather jacket and trousers painted with light warm ochre; in the left hand on his knee he holds a hat decked with fantastic feathers, in the right hand lifted to his face the thumb and index finger touch, as if he wanted to stress with this gesture the importance and subtlety of the spoken words. A woman in black faces the spectator, her eyes

drowned in a glass of wine. And finally, her—the heroine of the painting, with her back turned to us, haughty, slender, precious. Terborch dressed her in a lordly manner. Her blond hair, combed up and gathered in a black ribbon, reveals a beautiful neck, a black, wide, velvet shawl-like collar, puffed sleeves, a dress with a high waist and silvery undulating satin that flows down from the waist, forming a small train on the floor. Terborch, who painted with such reticence gray and black portraits, gives in "Fatherly Admonition" a concert of coloristic mastery in difficult chromatic compositions: red, black, matte white, the subdued red of the bed curtain, the low deadly black of the model's collar, and the light, dazzling, joyful white of her dress. Whenever I try to recall this painting of Terborch, I close my eyes and see first of all the heroine of the scene, a "beauty with her back turned" who brightens the darkness like a candle in a precious candlestick, while other persons, objects, details remain unclear, blurred and wavering.

In his novel *Die Wahlverwandschaften*[6], Goethe describes a popular game of the time in which a tableau was acted out. A work of art was reconstructed as faithfully as possible by persons in appropriate costumes; they imitated the gestures, expressions, and atmosphere of the original. In a word: painting transposed for the stage of a theater, frozen in immobility and silence.

One evening they performed Van Dyck's "Belissarius," Poussin's "Ashuarus and Esther," and then Terborch's "Fatherly Admonition." Precisely this painting provoked the unusual enthusiasm of the spectators, thunderous applause, and calls of "encore." It was the figure of "the girl with her back turned" that won their hearts most of all, her artfully arranged hair, the shape of her head, her lightness. One of the enchanted spectators called out, "Tournez, s'il vous plaît," others joined in, but the artists who knew the rules of the game remained indifferent and unmoved.

A few centuries passed during which a dispute, even a scandal, broke out about the interpretation of "Fatherly Admonition." Those who "read paintings" announced that the title had been invented by bigots and in fact the painting represented—fearful to admit—a scene from a public house.

Dutch painters often composed the interiors of brothels with tipsy men and concubines pouring wine, intently staring at the purses of their clients (not to leave any doubts, they would also add copulating dogs). However Terborch did everything to mislead us. The interior in "Fatherly Admonition" is really the interior of a well-to-do bourgeois home. The whole scene is steeped in an atmosphere of honesty, peacefulness, and reticence. Not a trace of violent gestures or unbridled lust. Such is the general impression. Inexorable realities indicate something different. Could a young soldier in his twenties be the father of "the beauty with her back turned"? Why has the golden coin that he temptingly holds in his right hand been erased (traces of retouching are visible on the canvas)? Is the woman in black sipping wine a mother, or simply a procuress —paintings with similar subjects show them—an intermediary in a sinful relationship? In emblematics all this game of meanings in which Terborch delighted is called a paradox; it consists in showing a morally reprehensible event with irreproachable decorations, saturated with virtue and nobility.

Compared to the boring, obsessively "scientific" studies of contemporary scholars, dry as sawdust, how favorably the old art historians' manner of writing stands out: a flowing style not without charm, always appealing to our ability to see, always hitting the mark with short, synthetic silhouettes of the masters under consideration. The incomparable Max Friedländer[7] characterizes Terborch in the following way: "Good taste, tact, and sense of proportion inform his work. He endowed the Dutch bourgeoisie with a touch of French grace and Spanish *grandezza,* and it seems he possesses all the traits of a diplomat: elegance full of dignity, and a reserved spirit of conciliation." The subtle drawing of Terborch, his avoiding of violent coloristic compositions, the cool, silvery tonality and gradations of gray all the way to the majestic black that encloses the painting, do not escape Friedländer's attention. Also Terborch's mastery in rendering the consistency of objects, especially fabrics, from rustling cool silks to meaty wool that absorbs light. Finally, the peculiar eroticism of the artist: puritanical, coded, barely mentioned but so much the more intriguing.

Indeed Terborch gives the impression of an artist who is one of a kind, without genealogy, influences, or evolution—therefore easily recognizable. But is this really so? At least two of his paintings do not give me peace. The first is the "Grinder's Family" in Berlin's Dahlem.

At the rear of a courtyard, a murky shed patched together with boards—the atelier of an artisan who at this moment bends over his wheel waiting for a client. On the right, something that once might have been a house but has been reduced by time to one floor made of bricks, with peeling stucco. Three dark openings imitate windows and a door. A mother who is delousing a child, a courtyard paved with cobbles, an overturned chair, tools in disarray. The whole is a study of abandonment, dilapidation, and poverty. With what obstinate precision this painter of elegance and synthesis traces all the repelling details and horrible minutiae. The naturalists of the middle of the nineteenth century painted this way trying to evoke compassion for the fate of the urban proletariat. But how did the elegant Councillor Terborch hit upon this alley-way of misery?

The "Procession of Flagellants" from the Rotterdam Museum Boymans van Beuningen I took without hesitation to be an error of an absentminded curator who hung a Spaniard among the Dutch. The "Procession" is a scene of violent, sharp contrasts of chiaroscuro. The atmosphere of menace and mysteriousness oscillates between a rending shout and deadly silence. Light falls from the lit torches, creating puddles of brightness amid thick, almost fleshlike darkness. On the left, something like an altar or a tribune. In the center, three exorcists in white frocks and white conical hoods recall predatory animals in an atlas of nightmarish hallucinations. We also see a man tied to a fence or wall with stretched-out arms, bare to his waist, on whom a storm of whiplashes will fall in a moment.

When later I looked at this painting, many times I invariably thought: But this is Goya, no one else but Goya—his subject matter, his way of painting, his violence and cruelty. How can it be that a painter from a northern country, where other tastes and traditions govern art, has anticipated by

a century and a half the great Spaniard? A memory from Terborch's youthful travels? Very likely, but this does not explain the similarities or identity of style. A lesson in humility. We will never solve all the secrets of the imagination.

In the Mauritshuis, a self-portrait of the master: a large head somewhat out of proportion with the rest of the body, a rather common face, thick nose, gluttonous lips, and sharp eyes looking at us with unconcealed irony, as if he were saying, Yes I knew well the world of poverty and ugliness, but I painted the skin, the glittering surface, the appearance of things: the silky ladies, and gentlemen in irreproachable black. I admired how fiercely they fought for a life slightly longer than the one for which they were destined. They protected themselves with fashion, tailors' accessories, a fancy ruffle, ingenious cuffs, a fold, a pleat, any detail that would allow them to last a little longer before they—and we as well—are engulfed by the black background.

STILL LIFE WITH A BRIDLE

For Józef Czapski[1]

Car je est un autre[2]

ARTHUR RIMBAUD

1

THIS IS HOW IT happened. Years ago, during my first visit to the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam, I was crossing a room with the marvelous "Married Couple" of Hals and the beautiful "Concert" of Duyster[3] when I came upon a canvas by a painter unknown to me.

I understood immediately, though it is hard to explain rationally, something very important had happened; something far more important than an accidental encounter in a crowd of masterpieces. How to describe this inner state? A suddenly awakened intense curiosity, sharp concentration with the senses alarmed, hope for an adventure and consent to be dazzled. I experienced an almost physical sensation as if someone called me, summoned me. The painting registered for long years in my memory, sharply etched and insistent, but it was not an image of a face with fiery eyes or even a dramatic scene, but a calm, static still life.

Here is an inventory of the objects represented in the painting: on the right side a potbellied pitcher of burnt clay in

a warm, saturated brown; in the middle a massive glass goblet, called a *roemer*, half-filled with liquid; and on the left side a silver-gray pewter pitcher with a lid and spout. In addition two porcelain pipes, a piece of paper with music, and a text on the shelf where the utensils were standing. At the top, metal objects I could not at first identify.

The background was the most fascinating of all: black, deep as a precipice and at the same time flat as a mirror, palpable and disappearing in perspectives of infinity. A transparent cover over the abyss.

At the time I jotted down the name of the painter, Torrentius. Then I looked for more information about him in various art histories, encyclopedias, and dictionaries of artists. But the dictionaries and encyclopedias were silent, or I found only confused and deceptive references. It seemed Torrentius was a hypothesis of scholars, but in fact never existed.

When I finally went to the original sources and documents, the amazing life of the painter suddenly appeared before my eyes—an unusual, dramatic, stormy life completely different from the banal biographies of most of his professional colleagues. For the few who wrote about him he was an enigmatic, disquieting figure. His glittering career and tragic end did not form any logical or clear pattern, but made an entangled knot of many threads—artistic, social, moral, and finally, it seems, political.

In good bourgeois fashion his name was simply Jan Simon van de Beeck. His Latin nom de guerre comes from the word *torrens*, which in its adjectival form means "hot, incandescent," and as a noun means "a wild, rushing stream"—the two unreconciled, antagonistic elements of fire and water. If one could write one's own destiny into a pen name, Torrentius did it with prophetic intuition.

He was born in Amsterdam in 1589. We do not know who his master was, but we know that from the beginning of his artistic career Torrentius was a famous, fashionable, and wealthy painter. His still lifes in particular enjoyed tremendous success. "In my opinion," Constantijn Huygens wrote in his

Observations on Painting, "he is a magician in representing still objects."

The Orpheus of the still life. He was surrounded by an aura of mystery, and legends circulated about what took place in his atelier, tales about supernatural forces he brought into his work. Probably Torrentius thought a certain dose of charlatanism did not harm art (differing here from his modest guild brothers of the Fraternity of Saint Luke), but on the contrary helped it. For example, he used to say he did not in fact paint but only placed paints on the floor next to his canvases; under the influence of musical sounds they arranged themselves in colorful harmonies. But is not art, every art, a kind of alchemical transmutation? From pigments dissolved in oil arise flowers, towns, bays of the ocean, and views of paradise truer than the real ones.

"As for the life and conduct of that man," Huygens adds as if in passing, "I would not want to assume the role of a Roman judge in a toga." Discretion worthy of praise, because it was just this subject that was much discussed, universally and with fierce relish. Torrentius was handsome, dressed with sophisticated elegance, led a magnificent life, had a lackey, and rode a horse. What is worse, he surrounded himself with a group of friends and admirers, wandering from town to town with them like Dionysus leading a crowd of satyrs, organizing sumptuous, not-quite-decent feasts in taverns, inns, and public houses. The notoriety of a scandalizer and libertine followed him; the claims and grievances of seduced women increased as well as his unpaid bills. In the Leyden tavern Under the Rainbow alone, his debt for food and drink amounted to the not trivial sum of 484 florins. Some gently called him an epicurean, others did not spare stern words of condemnation: *in summa seductor civium*[4], *impostor populi, corruptor juventutis, stupator feminarum.*

If all this was not enough, Torrentius had a Socratic streak, namely a predilection for discussions on the subject of faith. He was intelligent, well-read, brilliant, and missed no opportunity to get the better of a pastor or theology student. It is hard to say what religious views he represented. Most likely

his disputes were only displays of dialectics, and their motive was the pure pleasure in making fools out of others.

Torrentius must have realized he was playing with fire, and pursued a dangerous game. But he counted on his lucky star, his talent, and his irresistible personal charm. The role he first assumed, lightheartedly and for show, became part of his self, and began to direct his destiny.

Dark clouds began to gather over the painter's head, and they took on quite unexpected shapes. A suspicion arose that he was a member and even leader of the Dutch secret association of Rosicrucians (a kind of freemasonry *avant la lettre*), whose goal was mystical reform, renewal of the world, and preparation for a divine kingdom on earth. Different elements united in the philosophy, or what they called Pansophy or Omni-wisdom, of this movement: the Kaballa, Neo-Platonism, Gnosis, the esoteric interpretation of Christianity, and most of all the views of the German theologian Johann Valentine Andreae[5]. At the end of the sixteenth century and later the Rosicrucians had a sizable number of adepts, particularly in England, France, and Germany. Among them were many distinguished personalities of the time, princes, scholars, and thinkers. Indeed it was a very appealing current, since it attracted fine minds like Komensky, Leibniz, and Descartes.

Secret associations do not leave a register of their members for posterity, therefore it is hard to ascertain whether Torrentius was a Rosicrucian. But it is a fact that surveillance of the painter started for this reason. The Republic's authorities might have been afraid of the activities of this secret confraternity, with its far-flung international influence; in 1625 an agreement between French and Dutch Rosicrucians was discovered in Haarlem. But this might just as well have been a pretext. Holland was famous for religious and denominational liberty, unparalleled elsewhere in Europe. The following event best illustrates the spiritual situation in the homeland of Erasmus.

In 1596 an artisan accused of heresy was brought before a tribunal in Amsterdam. He was a cobbler by profession, but an

unusual one because he had learned Latin and Hebrew by himself to study the Bible. During these studies, carried out with the proverbial passion of cobblers, he came to the conclusion that Christ was only a man. He talked about it widely with his relatives and friends, and, what is worse, with strangers. The accusation of heresy could theoretically lead to the stake, but one of the mayors of Amsterdam intervened in the trial and took up the defense of the unfortunate enthusiast of the Bible, proving that if the Church had already dispensed appropriate spiritual punishment—exclusion from the community of the faithful—it was unnecessary for fallible human justice to pronounce a verdict once again in this intricate matter. He also said that human life should not depend on the subtle considerations of theologians.

Quite unexpectedly, on June 30, 1627, Torrentius was arrested and put in prison in Haarlem.

In the beginning one could suppose the whole affair would end quietly, primo, with a paternal reprimand from the tribunal; secundo, with an earnest promise by the repentant sinner to desist; and tertio, with a heavy fine. It soon appeared, however, that the matter was taking a fatal turn, and that even before probate proceedings the court was trying to sentence the criminal artist at any price, severely and using any pretext.

This was shown by the huge number of witnesses who were called. Personal enemies of Torrentius were predominant, and these were innumerable. Testimonies concerned the two kinds of offense the painter was accused of: breaking obligatory moral norms, and impiety. With regard to the first, abundant criminal evidence was provided for the court by servants from the houses in which the artist lived, owners of taverns, and accidental witnesses of his notorious extravaganzas.

One of them saw this intimate scene: Torrentius with a young woman on his lap. Another, the owner of the tavern Under the Snake, in Delft, told a moving story about a girl to whom the painter threw candies through a window until she succumbed to him, and when she became pregnant he viciously abandoned her. In addition, he publicly laughed at

her. A member of the well-known family van Beresteyn also came forward as witness; he asserted that Torrentius brought women of easy virtue together in a tavern, using a letter from the Prince of Orange, *salvia guardia,* as his authority. Supposedly it gave him power over the demimonde of the entire Republic. Van Beresteyn also testified that the accused organized feasts for honorable councillors and wealthy merchants, inviting young ladies from honest households; these were followed by collective carnal pleasures. One might prolong the list of accusations; most likely truth was mixed with gossip, honest testimony with vile denunciations. But let us stop with these selected examples. It seems more important to attempt to answer the question of whether Torrentius, against the background of the manners of his time, was a figure impossible to accept: a malicious type of moral monster.

The English ambassador William Temple, a keen observer of the life of the Dutch, says their temperament and traits of character were conditioned by their physical constitution; reasonable and moderate by nature, they did not succumb to great passions, of course with some exceptions. The severity of Calvinism in the Republic was tempered by a universal spirit of tolerance. A sizable margin of freedom existed next to exemplary bourgeois and philistine morality. Someone rightly observed that the liberty so beloved by the Dutch originated in hatred of force rather than the fascination with abstract slogans, in which various revolutionaries did, and do, excel. Imposing achievements in the domain of democracy were guarded to a greater degree by custom, to a smaller degree by institutions. Likewise, tolerance usually ended when it encountered extremes, for example blatant manifestations of disbelief. In 1642 Francis van den Meurs, who did not believe in the divinity of Christ and the immorality of the soul, was put in the Amsterdam prison. He stayed there seven months, then was released.

Morality was severe, especially in the villages. Choice of future wives and betrothals were regulated by rules of century-old traditions and, just in case, took place under the watchful eyes of grown-ups. Of course the young preferred less formal ways of meeting: on the ice rink, in secluded places in the

woods, on the shore of the sea, even in church. The pastors thundered against this from their pulpits, meddling in every possible and impossible matter of daily life. They fought against the theater, tobacco smoking, drinking coffee, pompous funerals, lavish weddings; they condemned long hair for men, silver platters, and even Sunday excursions outside town. The faithful listened with pious expressions and did what they pleased. Marriage was in general a solid institution. A father or husband had the right to punish a woman caught *in flagrante*; in such cases, even murder could go unpunished. They shut their eyes when a single man maintained relations with an unmarried woman, provided he kept up necessary appearances; but if he was married and caught in the midst of sinful, amorous cooing, he usually paid a hefty fine.

In comparison with most European royal and aristocratic courts of the time, the court of the sovereigns of the Netherlands was an oasis of modesty. Only William II spoiled this exemplary image of moderation and virtue. His exuberant temperament was a charming subject for biting satires and ephemeral poems, while his all-too-numerous love affairs were pointed out even on theater stages.

On the other hand, a widespread, half-pagan institution existed that was deeply rooted in tradition, namely, fairs—a combination of market, church holiday, and an explosion of unbridled folk licence. Hundreds of paintings represent these Dutch bacchanalia (it is impossible to understand the life of the Dutch without them). A crowd of parsimonious peasants and artisans undergoes a sudden metamorphosis; they hang their steadfast virtues on a peg and gladly succumb to the temptations of the Seven Capital Sins. The aftermath of these fairs was a huge number of children born out of wedlock, and foundlings. Patient public benevolence built ever new houses and orphanages for them.

In the big cities and especially the ports, prostitution thrived. No attempts were even made to fight it, as people realized the effort was in vain, yet the sense of order required these social phenomena to be contained within certain limits. It was done in an original way. In some districts of Amsterdam the care of the houses of ill-fame was entrusted to policemen,

and these guardians of public order collaborated with prostitutes in exemplary harmony. They carried out a procedure not quite legal but lucrative. The streetwalker, disguised as a young girl, lured an honest, rich citizen to a specific spot where the police were already waiting and meted out to the "seducer" an appropriate monetary fine. Most likely everyone paid, fearing a scandal.

How did the "Torrentius case" look against this background? To speak delicately, the painter violated generally accepted moral norms; he did it systematically, from conviction, and ostentatiously as a confession of faith. Therefore the artist's main guilt was not his exuberant and dissolute life but the atmosphere of scandal and notoriety he gave to his vagaries. Bourgeois morality does not excuse this. The collected evidence of his guilt in the matter did not yet constitute a basis for imposing a stiff penalty. So a charge of a much greater weight was drawn up: namely, impiety.

It is well known that this is not a precise concept and leaves a wide field for legal interpreters to display their talents. The privilege of lack of clarity has only too often been abused in history, usually with fatal consequences for the accused. In the case of Torrentius, they wanted to prove that the painter was an avowed, aggressive blasphemer who fought not only the dogmas of faith but doubted the existence of God.

Then it began, *horribile dictu* because the affair took place in enlightened Holland. Testimonies were collected to prove a close connection between the painter and the unclean powers. Someone informed that Torrentius often strolled in the forest, where he had conversations with the devil, far from human eyes; that he bought a black rooster and a hen at the market for his supposedly magical practices; and that voices of immaterial beings came from his atelier. It is easy to guess that these were whispers of completely corporeal ladies who visited the painter under cover of darkness.

Accommodating owners of taverns and inns where Torrentius used to spend rollicking evenings and nights outdid one another in providing proofs of his guilt. What kind of proofs? To say the least, dubious proofs: overheard

conversations, bits of dialogue, even drunken shouts. They did not form any logical whole. So much the better.

One witness testified that the painter pronounced incomprehensible remarks about the Trinity and Christ's Passion, others informed that Torrentius once called the Bible a muzzle put on enlightened minds, he thought the Deluge too severe a punishment against humanity, he had his own views on the subject of hell and paradise, once a toast to Satan was drunk in his presence, he also addressed women by using his favorite expression, "My soul desires your body."

The court did not want to acknowledge the simple fact that the painter was talkative by nature; when excited by wine and joyous company demanding displays of extravagance, he provoked, scandalized, spouted nonsense—in a word, entertained his companions and not always in the best style. What is worse, voices raised in favor of the accused were not taken into consideration. A young painter from Delft, Christian van Couwenberch[6], and his father testified under oath that during their six-year acquaintance with Torrentius they did not hear a single blasphemy from his mouth. On the contrary, he always defended the truth of the faith with zeal, and he also attacked Socinians[7] and other heretics. The court annotated this kind of testimony with the comment "nihil," which means it was rejected without any reasons given.

Torrentius was alone. All the legal guarantees of the accused were waived, because extraordinary proceedings were ordered that did not even permit a defense. The indictment accused him with thirty-one counts; the most severe concerned heresy and offense against what is sacred.

He was interrogated five times, the last on December 29, 1627, in extraordinary circumstances, about which more in a moment. Torrentius defended himself with consistency, logic, and persuasion, realizing it was a game for high stakes. Yes, it is true he often took advantage of the services of different girls, but as a painter of mythological scenes (a rare genre in Holland) he always looked for models ready to pose naked, because the Olympians had a liking for this. When he organized feasts in some setting of not the best reputation, he

invited exclusively adult males, who realized that they were not coming to meditate on riddles of existence. Therefore, he was not a depraver in the ordinary sense of the word.

Energetically and deliberately he refuted the accusations about questions of religion: he never insulted God or attacked dogma. Yes, it happened that he discussed religious subjects with passion and the inquisitiveness born of a restless conscience, but even this testified to his advantage, because it showed these problems were important for him. Other citizens behaved the same way. A curious thing—during the investigation the accusation that Torrentius belonged to a secret association simply evaporated. Yet it was the point of departure for the whole action.

Against the background of Dutch court chronicles of the seventeenth century, Torrentius's trial is the most convoluted, obscure, and morally repelling, especially from the moment when the decision was taken to employ methods of physical force against the accused. The court, unable to force an admission of guilt from Torrentius, decided to break him by torture. This method belonged to the repertory of the hated Inquisition and continued to be used only for common criminals, yet the accused did not belong to this category in any way. The Haarlem judges certainly realized they had gone too far when they addressed a letter to five eminent jurists from The Hague, asking them for an opinion as to whether such drastic methods of investigation were permitted in this case. The five famous lawyers responded: the application of torture to those who commit a weighty offense against divine majesty is a legal means.

"If something slips from my lips when you inflict suffering on me, it will be a lie," the artist supposedly shouted at his torturers. An amazing thing happened: the tools to force his confession appeared to be powerless. Torrentius did not admit the crimes he was accused of.

On January 28, 1628, a verdict was pronounced: burning at the stake, and hanging of the corpse from a gallows. As if frightened by its own cruelty, the court changed the

punishment to twenty years in prison. It was synonymous with slow death in a dungeon.

To the credit of Dutch society it has to be stated that this cruel verdict had wide repercussions and provoked outrage, though of course bigots gave voice to their satisfaction. Many leaflets appeared claiming the whole trial was a return to the practices of the Spanish occupiers. Eminent lawyers protested to the city authorities, claiming that the legal guarantees to which the accused was entitled were systematically violated during the investigation and court proceedings. The prosecutor's office, with a calm undisturbed by pangs of conscience, answered simply that in the case of Torrentius the severity of the crimes committed justified the extraordinary procedure.

Even Holland's regent, Prince Frederick Henry, took a lively interest in the whole matter. He could not have the slightest influence on its outcome, but during the trial he demanded an impartial investigation. After the verdict, he listened to reports by friends of the condemned painter who informed him that Torrentius remained in complete isolation from the world, without medical aid or the possibility of practicing his profession. The prince proposed that the artist be freed from prison. He promised he would give instructions to find another suitable place of isolation where the condemned man would find care, supervision, and the conditions indispensable for creative work.

The fathers of the respected city of Haarlem answered with a letter full of courtesies and subterfuges. They maintained that the condemned man was not as badly off as he was reputed to be. The prison guard took care of him as if he were his servant; the prisoner had a surgeon at his disposal, but he refused to undergo the necessary small surgical interventions (marks of torture could be seen "only" on his legs). His friends brought him linen and delicate food (it was probably their delicate consideration that prevented the councillors from mentioning that intensive interrogations of the prisoner had resulted in a damaged jaw, and problems with eating). No one had objections, either, to his performing his art, but clearly he did not feel like it. Therefore the release of Torrentius from

prison, even on the conditions proposed by the prince, seemed neither necessary nor just. Such an unmerited act of clemency would be interpreted by the majority of healthy public opinion as undermining the principles of justice, and it would encourage some toward similarly scandalous crimes. Also, one could not exclude a wave of protests and disturbances, because citizens expect the protection of laws, good manners, and religion from the authorities. Besides, a justified fear existed that even in his place of isolation Torrentius would continue to be what he was until now—that is, a scandalizer and blasphemer.

The only positive result of the intervention of the regent was that the prison regime was made less severe. More frequent visits by the painter's friends were allowed, his wife could spend fourteen days in his cell, every day he was permitted to buy a pitcher of wine exempt from the city tax—O what magnanimity—also a special commission of experts was convened, headed by Frans Hals, to examine whether one could perform art under prison conditions. It is deplorable that the report on this important and, unfortunately, still contemporary question has not survived to our times.

Everything indicated that Torrentius's fate was sealed, that he would never see the light of freedom.

But suddenly matters took an unexpected turn, expanding in an amazingly wide circle. For behold, the Prince of Orange received a letter from the King of England, Charles I. The document is dated May 30, 1630:

"Mon cousin"—wrote the English monarch—"having learned that a certain Torrentius, painter by profession, has been confined for several years in the municipal prison of Haarlem by virtue of a verdict decreed against him for scandalous behavior and profanation of religion, we want to assure you it is not our intention to undermine the justness of the aforementioned verdict nor to request that the punishment be shortened or alleviated because as we believe it justly fell upon him for such great crimes…." Here ends a convoluted introduction intended to dispel any suspicion that the king might intervene "in internal Dutch affairs," and we reach the

conclusion. Charles I asks that out of consideration for his great talent, Torrentius be released and sent to England *"près de nous"*—that is, to the court. There he will devote himself entirely to painting, and attentive eyes will watch that he does not fall into his old habits and inclinations.

One might succumb to the pleasant illusion that these words flowed from the tender heart of a monarch moved by the cruel fate of an artist. What is more probable is that Charles I—a well-known art lover, whose court painter, after all, was Van Dyck himself—decided simply to take advantage of the situation and procure the famous Torrentius cheaply, in exchange for an unclear promise of royal favors. One way or another diplomatic machinery was set in motion. The Secretary of State Viscount Dorchester intervened with Holland's Pensionary De Glarges; the royal ambassador Sir Dudley Carleton was particularly active in the affair. In nearly all letters the same argument is repeated: it would be a great loss if such an eminent artist miserably passed away.

These efforts were crowned with success. Torrentius left prison, but under three conditions: he had to pay the high costs of the trial, solemnly promise that he would leave for England immediately, and never return to his homeland.

We can re-create the further fate of the painter only in very general outline. Nothing certain is known about his stay in England. It seems that in the land of his saviors the incorrigible Torrentius continued his old lifestyle. This at least is how one can interpret an enigmatic mention of him, "giving more scandal than satisfaction," that we find in Horace Walpole's book *Painters in the Reign of Charles I.*

His return to Holland clearly borders on madness. He suddenly appeared in 1642, and indeed it is impossible to say what he counted on. That his guilt would be forgiven, and the biblical story of the Prodigal Son be repeated? After all, he knew the unrelenting hatred of Haarlem's bourgeois only too well. Maybe the exile was simply forced to flee from his place of asylum, and he could do nothing but return to his homeland, hoping with work to earn better memory from future generations. It is quite possible Torrentius also wanted to

challenge fate to a last duel, find his old companions and experience with them a few wild nights, recalling his youth with a Faustian gesture regardless of the price to be paid. Finally, it is not out of the question that he felt deadly tired of a game he himself had invented, and did not care what the continuation and finale might be of this tale full of sound and fury.

He met what everyone could have easily predicted—a second trial, of which hardly anything is known except that once again he underwent tortures. He died in his native Amsterdam a broken man on February 14, 1644.

The fate of Torrentius brings to mind a novel. But what kind? An adventure novel, or allegory? Our hero escapes formulas, definitions, and traditional descriptions, as if his only ambition after death was to deceive and repeat that he was a guest from nowhere, without ancestors, progeny, or relatives, an inhabitant of infinity.

It would be a modest statement, coming barely half a step closer to Torrentius's mystery, if we were to say that he was different, not at all like the other citizens of the Republic, a provocatively colorful bird amid birds of a uniform color. He probably treated his own life like a material substance to which he gave unusually sophisticated form; therefore he destroyed conventions, bewildered, and scandalized.

He deserves the title and sad dignity of precursor, for there was something of the Marquis de Sade in him, and something of the nineteenth-century *poètes maudits*, or to use a closer analogy, the Surrealists. He was ahead of his times, as if demanding the exceptional status of an artist in exchange for unusual works, and this was completely beyond the comprehension of the upright bourgeois, bourgeois painters included. This is why Torrentius had to suffer a defeat.

For us he remains the creator of a single painting, and a curious case on the borderline of politics, the history of manners, and art.

What happened to his works? It is justified to fear they shared the fate of their author and were destroyed. But here

and there one comes upon their traces, in inventories and brief references by contemporaries. Kramm, who wrote in the first half of the seventeenth century, mentions the portrait of a theologian. The painting was composed of two mobile surfaces, one placed on top of the other. The first represented the honorable scholar of divine affairs; when it was moved, before astonished eyes would appear "an artistic, unusually well-done scene from a public house." Not bad.

In the inventory of the collection of Charles I we find a notation about three paintings by Torrentius, terse but thought-provoking: "One is an Adam and Eve, his flesshe very ruddy, theye show there syde faces. The other is a woman pissing in a mans eare. The best of those 3 is a young woman sitting somewhat odly with her hand under her legg."

Many works of art have been condemned to a secret life, and what we see in the museums and art galleries, accessible to everyone, is only a part of the existing heritage of the past. The impenetrable remainder winters in closed labyrinths, treasure houses, and hiding places together with valuable papers jealously guarded by not always enlightened collectors. Therefore it is not out of the question—though the chances are not great—that a new Torrentius will emerge one day.

At a Parisian auction in 1865 a canvas by our painter was sold. No doubt it was signed, since at that time he was in the limbo of forgetfulness. We only know the title, "Diana and Actaeon." Neither a reproduction nor even a description of the work has been preserved. The situation was changed radically, as if touched by a wand (the object of our investigation forces us to make use of the terminology of magic), when Bredius[8], an excellent connoisseur of Dutch art, published in 1909 a pioneering monograph about the artist. Four years later the "Still Life with a Bridle" was discovered in quite unusual circumstances, which should not surprise us because it was like a last mockery from the other world. It served for several centuries as a cover for a barrel with raisins.

An anonymous reviewer writing in a 1922 publication about Viennese galleries reported a new work by Torrentius put up for sale; he described it as a real sensation, "Als ganz

ausserordentliche Seltenheit.” Its mythological subject was a peculiarity in itself; like nudes, it belonged to a rare genre in Dutch painting. In addition, what extreme audacity in his treatment of the subject. In the foreground a large, ornate bed, a baldachin with a fat cupid hanging above it; on the bed Mars and Venus are entirely preoccupied with each other. On the left side Vulcan appears with a net in his hand, intending to catch the divine couple in the act. Above, a group of Olympians watch the scene with delight, like spectators in a theater. A few more details: a little monkey squatting on the bed, a white Doberman pinscher. Under the bed, sandals and a night pot.

We know nothing of the further fate of this canvas nor its aesthetic qualities, aside from a general remark of the reviewer: “Es ist eine Feinmalerei[9].” But even this inventory of personages and objects emanates an atmosphere of the boudoir and dissoluteness, powder, perfumes, and sin. Wasn’t Torrentius far ahead of the style of his epoch, a solitary precursor of the rococo, a distant forerunner of Boucher and Fragonard? But in a country of sober-minded merchants, where did he find amateurs for his licentious works? Well, in almost every epoch there are collectors of obscene canvases who meticulously hide their treasures from the eyes of children, wives, and the guardians of morality. Only on exceptional occasions, excited by wine, will they wander with swaying steps toward their dark nooks and display them to their closest friends, bursting with an indecent giggle.

Only one painting was saved for us. One, and the only one stopped at the edge of nothingness.

2

THE LIFE OF TORRENTIUS is a ready literary fabric; it imposes a style, demands from the writer a rapid, breakneck narrative, sharp contrasts, baroque exaggeration, modeling of the protagonist from contradictory elements, and the art of expressing moods changing from lighthearted jauntiness and intoxication with the sensual world to the dread of the torture room and catastrophe. A bewitching subject.

It is much harder to manage his lonely work. It is homogeneous; at the same time it brings to mind a palimpsest and a subtly woven chain that leads to the bottom of a dark well of ever-new secrets. It lures us, and leads us astray.

An attempt to explain to anyone that the painting is a masterpiece seems quite hopeless, as usual in such cases. Art historians have not confirmed this with their word of honor, and I myself do not know how to translate my stifled shout when I first stood face-to-face with the "Still Life" into comprehensible language, nor the joyous surprise, the gratitude that I was endowed beyond measure, the soaring act of rapture.

I remember a certain episode that happened many years ago not far from Paris in an old monastery transformed into a retreat for intellectuals. A park, and in the park the ruins of a Gothic temple. The remains of the walls, white and thin as parchment, grew out of the ground. Their unreality was emphasized by the large, ogival windows through which lighthearted birds were flying. There were no longer stained-glass windows or columns, vaults or stone floors; only the skin of the architecture remained, as if hanging in the air. Inside the nave, fat pagan grass.

I remember this image better than the face of my interlocutor, Witold Gombrowicz[10], who was mocking my fondness for art. I did not even defend myself but only mumbled some nonsense, aware that I was only an object, a gymnast's bar upon which the writer was exercising his dialectical muscles. If I were an innocent stamp collector Gombrowicz would have made fun of my albums, classifiers, and sets of stamps; he would have proved that stamps are the lowest rungs of the ladder of existence, morally suspect.

"But it has absolutely no sense. How can one describe a cathedral, a sculpture, or some sort of painting," he asked me, quietly and pitilessly. "Leave this amusement to the historians of art. They don't understand anything either, but they have persuaded people they are cultivating a science." It sounded convincing. I know well, too well, all the agonies and vain effort of what is called description, and also the audacity of

translating the wonderful language of painting into the language—as voluminous, as receptive as hell—in which court verdicts and love novels are written. I don't even know very well what inclines me to undertake these efforts. I would like to believe that it is my impervious ideal that requires me to pay it clumsy homages.

It seems Gombrowicz was irritated by the innate "stupidity" of the fine arts. Indeed, there is no painting that even in a popular way could demonstrate the philosophy of Kant, or Husseri and Sartre, two favorite thinkers of the writer who served him to intellectually annihilate interlocutors that were first subject, however, to the meticulous manipulation of what he called *upupienie*.

But this very "stupidity," or to speak more delicately, naïveté, has always put me in a state of happiness. Thanks to the intermediary of paintings, I experienced the grace of meeting the Ionian philosophers of nature. Concepts sprouted only from things. We spoke the simple language of the elements. Water was water, a rock was a rock, fire was fire. How good that the deadly abstractions had not drunk all the blood of reality to the end.

Paul Valéry warned: "We should apologize that we dare to speak about painting." I was always aware of committing a tactless act.

The "Still Life" of Torrentius was discovered quite accidentally in 1913, almost exactly three centuries after its creation. The painting has the monogram of the painter on its back, as well as a stamp stating it belonged to the collection of Charles I.

Helpless wonder is the most appropriate attitude toward the posthumous fate of this artist. We cannot help it. I could tell about many events that have happened to me since I decided to investigate this painter: the sudden piling up of insurmountable difficulties, the mysterious disappearance of my notes (precisely about him), misleading signals, books leading on a false track. Torrentius fiercely defended himself from the alms of charitable memory.

The “Still Life with a Bridle” is in the shape of a circle somewhat flattened “on the opposite poles,” and creates the impression of a slightly concave mirror. Because of this mirror the objects assume an intensified and swollen reality. Torn from the environment that disturbs their peace, they lead a willful and majestic life. Our everyday, practical eye blurs contours and perceives only muddy, tangled traces of light. Painting invites us to the contemplation of individual, despised objects, it removes their banal accidentality; here an ordinary tumbler means more than it means—as if it were the sum of all tumblers, the essence of the species.

The light of the painting is peculiar: cold, cruel, one would like to say clinical. Its source is beyond the painted scene. A narrow shaft of brightness defines the figures with geometric precision, but it does not penetrate the depths, it stops before the smooth, hard wall of the background, black as basalt.

On the right side—but a literary description resembles the laborious moving of heavy furniture, it develops slowly in time while the painterly vision is sudden, given like a landscape seen in the illumination of lightning. On the right side, then, a clay jug with a warm, brown glaze on which a small circle of light has settled. In the middle the tumbler, called a *roemer*, made of thick glass and half-filled with wine. Finally, a pewter pitcher with an energetically protruding beak. These three vessels, lined up facing the spectator in a position of attention, stand on a barely outlined shelf near two pipes with their stems turned down, and the lightest detail of the painting, a white-hot piece of paper with a musical score and text. At the top is the object I could not decipher at first, which seemed to be a piece of old armor hanging on the wall; at closer observation, it appeared to be a chain bridle used to tame exceptionally skittish horses. This metal contraption, stripped of its stable commonness, emerges from the dark background threatening, hieratic, somber like the specter of the Great Commander.

Wonderfully misleading Torrentius jeers at all those investigators who want to define his status and place in the history of art. He could not fit within life; one looks vainly for him in textbooks in which everything results from something

and everything falls in well-behaved patterns. One is certain that in his generation he was an absolutely exceptional phenomenon without any definite artistic forebears, competitors, imitators, or pupils, a painter bursting schematic divisions into schools and trends.

This is probably why the not very clear title “master of illusory realism” was bestowed on him. What does it mean? Simply the rendering of people, objects, and landscapes so they seem alive, not only deceptively similar but identical with the model. The hand instinctively reaches out, wishing to liberate from their frame existences that were put to sleep. The old masters appealed not only to the eye, but also awakened other senses: taste, smell, touch, even hearing. Thus in the presence of their works we quite physically feel the sour taste of iron, the cold smoothness of a glass, the tickling of a peach or corduroy, the gentle warmth of clay pitchers, the dry eyes of the prophets, bouquet from old books, the breeze of an approaching storm.

The composition of Torrentius’s work is simple, almost ascetic. Built on horizontal and vertical axes, the painting is based on the design of a cross; it would make a graceful subject for practitioners of formal analysis and their somewhat pedantic search for parallels, diagonals, squares, circles, and triangles. But in this case such exertions do not seem very fruitful. From the beginning I had the irresistible impression that in the motionless world of the picture something much more, and something very essential, is occurring. As if the represented objects combined in meaningful relations and the entire composition contained a message, an incantation transmitted in the letters of a forgotten language.

The “Still Life with a Bridle” is for many historians one of a number of extremely popular allegories, namely the allegory Vanitas. One can agree with this, because who would dare to oppose Ecclesiastes, who proclaims that everything is vanity of vanities. But this simple explanation sems too superficial, too general. How to explain, for instance, the exceedingly daring and “surrealist” juxtaposition in the picture of the bridle hanging menacingly over the trinity of vessels? Above all, that

page with musical notes and a text. Maybe precisely here we should look for the hidden meaning of the work?

The text in Dutch is as follows:

E R Wat buten maat bestaat

int onmaats qaat verghaat.

The abbreviation used at the beginning of the verse can be read as "Eques Rosa Crucis," which brings us to the old scent —that is, the conjecture that Torrentius was a Rosicrucian. In fact, it is not a proof of anything. Equally well the artist could have painted this picture on commission from one of the members of the order, and according to his instructions. Similarly, during the Middle Ages an overwhelming majority of altar compositions were created according to strict indications from theologians who dictated to their artists the arrangement of scenes, symbols, even colors. Preserved contracts expressly attest to this.

Gnomic poems, particularly those that are esoteric texts, should be explained rather than translated word by word. One should approach them by degrees of meaning, carefully and on tiptoes, because literalness renders their meaning shallow and frightens away mystery.

Here is how I understand the text inscribed in Torrentius's painting:

What exists beyond measure (order)

in over-measure (disorder) will meet a bad end.

I realize this is one of several possible translations, and it sounds rather banal compared with the original, which shows a greater wealth of thought. However, the apparent obviousness of this translation should not be discouraging. Whoever has come in contact with the thought of the Pythagoreans or Neo-Platonism knows the large role played by the symbolism of

numbers in these movements, also the measure of and the search for a mathematical formula uniting man with the cosmos.

The intellectual construction of the poem is based on the antinomy of harmony and chaos, or of reasonable form and shapeless matter, which in the cosmologies of many religions was a dark mass awaiting the divine act of creation. In ethical categories Torrentius's "Still Life" is not at all an allegory of Vanitas if my suppositions are correct, but an allegory of one of the cardinal virtues called Moderation, Temperantia, Sophrosyne. This interpretation is suggested by the represented objects: a bridle, the reins of the passions, vessels that give shape to formless liquids, and also the tumbler only half-filled as if recalling the praiseworthy custom of the Greeks of mixing wine with water.

Thus I had reasons to believe my exegesis of Torrentius's painting was very probable. Wasn't it clear, and logically cohesive? It had only one defect: precisely that suspicious simplicity.

So the poem inscribed in the painting did not leave me in peace, a poem that possessed a stonelike compactness and the finality of a sacred formula. To reach its philosophical sources I started to leaf through treatises by esoteric writers contemporary with the painter, above all Johann Valentin Andreae. *Fama Fraternitalis* and *Confessio* are the basis for learning the doctrine of the Fraternity. Then the work of the English physician Robert Fludd[11], who contributed much to popularizing the ideas of the Rosicrucians; the strange, intricate books of the alchemist Studion[12], who searched for the ideal dimensions of the Mystical Temple; and of course works by Jacob Boehme and Theophrast Bombastus of Hohenheim[13].

At the beginning the reading of hermetic books has a taste of Great Adventure; it is a marvelous wandering of uninitiated thought through exotic lands. The gray abstractions of philosophers are replaced by graceful symbols and images; everything connects with everything else and moves toward the desired Unity. The world becomes weightless and

transparent. Provided you accept the first frail premise, provided you only adapt to the secret language, do not ask for definitions, put trust in the Method. To submit means to believe. How strange that the most obscure ideological obsessions take a similar course.

I think I had a sufficient supply of patience, even good will, but I lacked humility. It was my skeptical devil that guarded me from rapture and the grace of Illumination. I say this without pride, with a bit of regret. In the end there remained only a cool delectation. Without attaining initiation, spurned by the Mystery of the chosen, I fell into the hell of the aesthetes. Truly beautiful are those constructions of liberated minds: vertiginous pyramids of spirit, monuments of air, mirrorlike labyrinths of allegory, precious animals and stones; green jasper, the sign of luminosity; blue sapphire, truth; golden topaz, harmony.

These peregrinations over so many treatises were not at all wasted. I received important information from them. It is known that sects and secret societies base their doctrines on the teachings of a prophet-founder who radiates the attraction of an old tradition. For the Rosicrucians it was Christian Rosenkreutz[14], a German nobleman and knight-errant of gnosis who during a trip to the Holy Land, Damascus, Africa, and Spain acquired knowledge from Arab sages about the last things. As befits a prophet he lived long, 107 years (1378–1485). After returning to his country he founded a small order and devoted himself to occult studies. According to legend, 120 years after the master's death his body was discovered, untouched by decay, in an underground tomb in the shape of a chapel-sanctuary. The description of this sepulchral construction of which no trace has remained is like a guide through an imaginary museum of symbols: sculptures, inscriptions, a lamp that would be extinguished when a noninitiated person approached, old books, complicated geometrical figures on the floor, and ingenious vaults. With these objects of cult it seems mirrors were discovered in which the symbols of virtues were affixed in a miraculous manner. Hence the content of Torrentius's painting.

For several score years the Order of Rosicrucians led the secret life of the catacombs. During this period it feverishly looked for influential protectors, princes, and scholars; it founded international "lodges," gathered at secret conventicles, published anonymous tracts. Their caution was well-motivated, for the Fraternity was accused of close contacts with the Reformation, of decided hostility toward Rome, sympathies with the Arab and Jewish worlds, plans to overturn the established order, and of course contacts with unclean powers.

After a long period of incubation the Rosicrucians decided to begin open activity on a large scale. It was believed the appropriate moment had come to accomplish the work of transforming the world. It happened in the year 1614. At this time a famous pamphlet appeared, *Allgemeine und General Reformation der ganzen weiten Welt.* Is it just an accident that the "Still Life with a Bridle" bears precisely this date?

THIS IS HOW I finished the first version of my essay about Torrentius. I put the manuscript away in a drawer. I secretly counted that time would work to my advantage. Investigation of difficult subjects requires alchemical patience.

A few years later, quite unexpectedly and without any action on my part, I received a parcel in the mail with a copy of a short, very learned treatise about my painter. A true gift from heaven and human good will. A letter sent from Holland had wandered senselessly through many countries and reached my hands in a pitiful state. Pages were stuck to each other or worn, sheets had greasy spots, the printing was smudged. I don't know who maltreated this innocent work, probably official Peeping Toms of other people's letters, and not gentlemen, which releases me from wasting time on an incident of menials. Luckily the text was bilingual; after difficult compilations I managed to understand its content. I could not get rid of the feeling that whoever falls into Torrentius's snares must be ready for anything.

The author of this treatise, the Dutch historian of art and music Pieter Fischer, draws attention for the first time to the musical page in the "Still Life," those notes and a small score inscribed in the painting. Until now this was generally thought to be a decorative element—a simple ornament—and that there was no connection between the notes and the text below. Fischer proves that such a connection exists, and that it has to be discovered to better understand the meaning of the work.

It is indeed surprising that no one noticed the evident mistake in Torrentius's couplet. Everyone, absolutely everyone, read the word *quaat* (evil), while in the painting it is clearly, black on white, *qaat.* One could say the painter was not very strong in orthography, were it not for the fact that above this word is a note that breaks harmony (h and not b, as it should be). It is therefore an intended, completely conscious, double mistake of orthography and music, an infraction of the principles of language and melody. A symbolic violation of order. In the Middle Ages this musical-moralistic procedure bore the name *diabolus in musica*, and it usually accompanied the word *peccatum.*

Fischer's interpretation of the text itself, the couplet, seems less convincing. The author believes that the abbreviation "E R" opening the poem signifies Extra Ratione, which prompts him to reel off further bold hypotheses. A painter with such a scandalous life who challenged the world could not be an apologist of restraint. The "Still Life with a Bridle" should be understood as an apparent allegory of moderation, while in reality, in an intricately camouflaged way, it is the praise of a man liberated from bonds, uncommon, standing high above the crowd of petty philistines.

In the English catalogue of the Rijksmuseum I found a different version of the disquieting poem from Torrentius's painting. It is not a literal translation, but one of the possible attempts to understand the hermetic text: "That which is extraordinary has an extraordinary bad fate." It sounds too explicit, rather flat, and it is not certain why a prophetic gift is ascribed to the artist, a foreboding of his ill-fated end.

Finally, one should pose the question whether Torrentius's work—so splendidly substantial and classically self-enclosed—really demands complex explanations that overstep the framework of its autonomous world. It is indifferent to us which spirits, good or evil, wise or reckless, inspired the painter's work. After all, the painting does not live by the reflected glow of secret books and treatises. It has its own light, the clear, penetrating light of clarity.

IT IS TIME TO part with Torrentius. I studied him long enough to admit my ignorance with a clear conscience. I suspect I put a defensive mechanism into motion, as if fearing that from this truly tragic history a figure of an ordinary adventurer would emerge. I did not want it, so I collected proofs he was an unusual man bursting measures and standards, systematically and with stubbornness worthy of a martyr's palm.

As a legacy he left us an allegory of restraint, a work of great discipline, self-knowledge, and order, contradicting his reckless existential experience. But only simpletons and naive moralizers demand exemplary harmony of life and work from an artist.

We will probably never learn who he really was. A victim of a political conspiracy? The flagrant disproportion of crime and punishment, the resonance of the trial and diplomatic intervention, all indicate this. Could the vindictiveness of the husbands and fathers of seduced women go as far as judicial murder? What was his connection with the Rosicrucians? One cannot altogether rule out that his scandalous excesses were a misleading maneuver, a mask concealing the conspiratorial activity of a member of the Fraternity. Perhaps he was a peculiar ascetic *à rebours*—they appear not only in Russian novels—who by his fall and sin aims in a roundabout way at the highest good.

So many questions. I did not manage to break the code. The enigmatic painter, the incomprehensible man, begins to pass from the plane of investigation based on flimsy sources to an

indistinct sphere of fantasy, the domain of tellers of tales. Thus it is time to part with Torrentius.

Farewell, still life.

Good night, severed head.

THE NONHEROIC SUBJECT

DUTCH PAINTING SPEAKS many languages, it tells about the matters of earth and of heaven. It lacks only one thing: the immortalization of the moments of its defeat and glory, the apotheosis of its own history. After all, it was a history abundant in dramatic episodes, insurrections, terror, sieges, struggles with powerful adversaries such as England, Spain, and France.

When Dutch artists painted war it was the war of light and darkness, also the smooth water of the canals with a solitary mill on the shore, an ice rink under the pink sky of sunset, the interior of a pub with shouting drunkards, a girl reading a letter. If other testimony had not been preserved we could think that the inhabitants of this low-lying country led a truly sweet life—they ate richly, drank copiously, and enjoyed cheerful company. In vain do we look for works by prominent painters that transmit to posterity the execution of Hoorn and of Egmont[1], the heroic defense of Leyden, or the assassination attempt against the Prince of Orange, William the Silent[2].

In his beautiful book *The Old Masters* Eugène Fromentin draws our attention to an unusual fact. In times pregnant with historical events, "a young man painted a bull on a pasture, another one who wished to please his friend—a physician—painted him in a dissecting room surrounded by his pupils and with a scalpel stuck in the arm of a corpse. These two paintings covered their names, their centuries and the country where they lived with immortal fame. What is it then that wins our gratitude? Is it dignity and truth? No. Is it greatness? Sometimes. And maybe beauty itself? Always beauty."

This is very nicely said, but it is doubtful that the pacifistic spirit of Dutch painting can be explained in purely aesthetic

terms. What, then, is behind this peculiar predilection for scenes from everyday life? Why did the Dutch avoid war subjects that exalt patriotic feelings? It seems the problem is much more profound; we must summon the aid of history, which molded the psychology of this nation.

Let us recall one of the most famous episodes in the Dutch struggles for freedom, the defense of Leyden, as it was described by a chronicler of the times, Emanuel van Materen[3].

Six years of the rule of the Duke of Alva[4], of terror and violence, did not succeed in breaking the resistance of the Netherlanders. The northern part of the country defended itself with particular fierceness. With the help of mercenaries, the Prince of Orange organized armed expeditions against the Spaniards, and the fighting continued with changing fortunes. After the long, drawn-out, heroic defense of Haarlem, when all means and supplies were exhausted, he capitulated to Alva's army. But the invaders did not manage to seize Alkmaar; they were compelled to end the siege of the city ingloriously.

The war in the Netherlands did not follow the usual course of events, or the traditional ritual of pitched battles on a large plain ending with only victors and those who beg for pity. Rather it was a general rebellion, a levy en masse of the entire nation—peasants, bourgeois, and nobility—against Spanish violence. It burst out like fire in different spots, died down but not completely, and flared up anew. The powerful army of occupation was constantly taken by surprise, and unable to deal a decisive blow.

In the beginning of the war a Spanish officer, unaware he was challenging fate, called the Dutch insurgents beggars *(gueux)*. These mendicants proved to be dangerous and invincible adversaries. Insurgents from the forest and ocean, especially the latter, whose bravery would be celebrated for centuries in folk song, attacked enemy convoys and even conquered ports, slaughtering the Spanish crews. "The red sun blazes over Holland," said one of the poets of the times.

Toward the end of 1573, Philip II recalled the Duke of Alva to Spain from his position as Commander in Chief in the Netherlands, the equivalent of disgrace. Always and

everywhere the politics of terror proves to be the politics of the blind. His successor, Don Luis de Requesens[5], tried to win the rebels over with acts of grace, tax reductions, and amnesty, but he never gave up his intention of forcing the unyielding North to its knees.

In May 1574, the Spanish Army came to Leyden. The fathers of the city unanimously decided to defend themselves, issuing a series of indispensable military and administrative decrees. The question of a just distribution of food was regulated at the beginning; during the first two months of the siege, every inhabitant of Leyden received half a pound of bread and milk (separated milk, as the scrupulous chronicler reports). At the time Leyden was not a large city. It had certain rustic features—for example, large stables and barns with more than 700 cows. The problem of feed for the animals was solved very cleverly; taking advantage of the Spaniards' inattention the cattle were led to nearby meadows, but as soon as sounds of war and shots were heard the animals galloped back to the city. During the entire siege only one cow and three absentminded calves were put on the list of losses.

The commander of the Spaniards, General Valdez, waited for the city to fall into his hands, captured either by hunger or a stratagem. It seems he trusted diplomacy more than artillery, at least in the initial phase of the clash. He sent letters to the defenders assuring them they could count on his magnanimity and forgiveness, and that the Spanish Army would not remain in the city for long. At the end he perversely argued that the submission of the fortress would not bring shame or loss of honor to anyone, while conquest by force would disgrace the unfortunate defenders.

Vain efforts. The inhabitants of Leyden were resolved to persist in their noble resistance. Valdez received a Latin poem in reply; its translation reads as follows:

The flute of the fowler luringly sings

Until the bird falls into the net's strings.

In September, after four months of fighting, the situation of the city became more critical each day. Witty poems no longer occurred to anyone. This time the defenders answered the repeated proposal of capitulation with a pathetic letter: "You place all your hope on the fact that we are hungry, and no relief comes to us. You call us eaters of cats and dogs, but as long as the mooing of cows is heard in the city we do not lack food. And when we will lack food, each of us has his left hand; we can cut it off, preserving the right hand to push the tyrant and his bloody horde away from the city walls."

At Leyden as at Troy there were speeches by leaders, brilliant replies, and deadly insults. All this flowery rhetoric seemed to be destined for the authors of future history textbooks. The truth was prosaic, banal, and gray—to persevere and survive one more month, one more week, one more day.

An acute lack of currency was felt in the city, so they decided to adapt the monetary system to the exceptional situation. Special paper banknotes were issued that would preserve value only during the period of siege. These new means of payment were decorated with slogans intended to comfort the defenders' hearts: a Latin inscription, *Haec libertas ego*, a picture of a lion, and a pious sigh, "May the Lord protect Leyden."

It was evident to everyone, however, that the city could be saved only with help from the outside. Hunger was increasing, there was no more bread. Meat, or rather the skin and bones of emaciated animals, was still rationed at half a pound per person; people hunted dogs, cats, and rats.

To make things worse, a plague broke out. Within a short period it swallowed up six thousand victims, which was half the population of the city. The men were so weakened that they had no strength to keep guard on top of the walls; when they returned home, they often found their wives and children dead.

As if these misfortunes were not enough, rioting broke out in Leyden. The chronicler speaks enigmatically about disagreement, muttering, and disputes. We can easily guess

what was concealed beneath these euphemisms. It was simply a rebellion of the city's poor, the ones who felt the burden of the siege the most painfully. They had only two alternatives—death from hunger, or slavery—and they were choosing the latter.

The mayor called all the population of the city to a public meeting. In a great, pathetic speech he announced that he was ready to offer his body to feed the hungry. Luckily, his statement was taken as it should be, not as a concrete offer but as a rhetorical figure.

The Estates General and William Prince of Orange, Commander in Chief of the Dutch Army quartered in nearby Delft, were aware that the situation in Leyden was fatal. The land army of the Prince of Orange was too weak to relieve the city and wage a battle with the enemy on firm ground. The strongest and most competent part of the armed forces of the Netherlands was the navy, but there was a serious obstacle: Leyden was not a port, it was situated inland. For aid—this rings almost magically—it was necessary to call on the element of water.

A careful plan to break the dikes and dams was worked out. The Dutch system of canals resembled a labyrinth of water, and woe to those who dared cross its frontiers. The decision to drown large tracts of arable fields and pastures was dramatic; consolation was found in folk wisdom, and in an old peasant proverb that said that in such extreme situations it is better to make soil barren than lose it forever.

In the shipyards of Rotterdam and other ports, feverish labor was in full swing. The giddy speed of building ships to take part in the operation of liberating Leyden is worthy of admiration, even for us who live in a technological era. The entire flotilla was composed of two hundred galleys with a shallow draught; moved by the force of the wind or oars, they were equipped with cannons and all the necessary equipment for war.

Everything now depended on one unpredictable factor—the weather. At first an unfavorable Nord was blowing; soon, however, the longed-for southwestern wind began to blow,

and, through openings in the dikes, pushed masses of water toward Leyden. The offensive of the element preceded the offensive of the armed forces.

The adversary was completely taken aback. The Spaniards tried to control the situation, hurriedly repairing the broken dikes, but the Dutch galleys stormed through, firing with all their cannons. In places where the water was not sufficiently deep, the crews jumped from the ships and pushed them in the direction of the enemy's entrenchments. Here was a great subject for a baroque painting: If Rubens had painted this battle he would probably have represented it as a struggle of Neptune with the chthonic deities.

The Spanish Army was unable to take advantage of its numerical superiority or tactical abilities. A land army that stands up to its knees in water fighting against a navy is a pure absurdity. There was only one way out—a quick raising of the siege and inglorious retreat. On the third of September 1574, at eight in the morning, Admiral Louis Boisot, commander of the Dutch soldiers who came with relief, entered the gates of the city to an enthusiastic welcome.

What remains in today's Leyden of these days of suffering and glory? A statue of the brave mayor, Pieter Adriaansz van der Werff, in the shade of old plane trees. His coat is thrown over his shoulders as if he were on his way to an ordinary city council meeting; only the rapier at his side indicates that the matters decided at the time were of life and death.

In the park there is also an old tower with a huge piece of wall chipped off by Spanish cannons during the last night of siege. A nice house decorated with images of birds recalls those times, and has been preserved. Three brothers lived there, Jan, Ulrich, and Willem, city musicians by profession whose hobby was breeding carrier pigeons. During the siege they happened to play a particularly important role. They almost became an institution, in a dual way—a postal ministry because they maintained the only possible contact with the external world during the siege, and an office of propaganda because the pigeons were tireless ambassadors of hope, promising quick relief to the defenders.

In the Leids Museum there is a large tapestry representing the attack of the Dutch flotilla against the Spanish entrenchments. Seen with the eye of a cartographer it is a huge green plain cut by the blue lines of rivers and canals, people small as insects busily moving between them. History from the perspective of God.

In the same museum we find neither cannons nor enemy standards, neither chipped swords nor cleft helmets. In a word, none of the esteemed bric-a-brac that one finds in other European collections devoted to great events of the past. On the other hand, a peculiar war trophy hangs in the place of honor: a large copper cauldron, used to cook food for soldiers, left by the Spaniards in their flight. A cauldron as a symbol of the return to normalcy, or if someone prefers, a symbol of victory.

DURING THE EIGHTY YEARS of fighting for independence the Dutch gave countless proofs of courage, perseverance, and determination. But this long war was not like any other that took place in Europe. It was a clash of two different ideals of life, two systems of values, and, one might say with a certain exaggeration, two diametrically different civilizations: the military aristocracy of the Spaniards, and the bourgeois-peasant world of the Netherlanders.

It is worthwhile to mention a characteristic detail. The chronicler of the Leyden defense says with evident satisfaction that during the assault, when the dikes in the direct neighborhood of the city were destroyed, only five or six men were killed. Such a negligible number of victims would not have attracted the attention of other European historians.

For the Dutch, war was not a beautiful craft, an adventure of youth, or the crowning of a man’s life. They undertook it without exaltation but also without protest, as one enters a struggle with an element. According to such a code of behavior, there was no room for displays of heroic bravery or spectacular death on the field of glory. On the contrary, what

was most important was to save: to protect, to spare, and carry from the storm a sane head and one's belongings.

The brutal force of the Spanish army of occupation was thus counteracted with intelligence, a strict merchant's calculation, organizational talents, and finally a stratagem. True, these were not knightly virtues. If the Dutch modeled themselves on the heroes of the great epics, surely Odysseus was closer to them than Achilles.

But there is no need to reach for mythology. The character and structure of Dutch society explain a lot; the men of war in Holland did not form a separate social class surrounded by a nimbus of fame or enjoying special prestige. The nobility, which in the rest of Europe formed an officer corps with centuries-old traditions, did not play a great role in the Republic. A young man who enlisted in the army as a soldier did not carry in his backpack a staff of office (if one may use such an anachronism), but the bitter bread of the poor, with no prospects that fortune would ever smile on him. When sick or wounded, he usually died in a shabby field hospital where epidemics were raging. Veterans begged in the city streets.

Holland did not have a fixed number of soldiers. The army was not a school to mold the spirit of its citizens, as with the Romans; the prestige of the state consisted in something entirely different. Hence a purely functional attitude toward the armed forces: during war the land army numbered a little more than a hundred thousand soldiers; during peace it fell to twenty thousand.

In the army of the Republic most of the land forces were foreign mercenaries; only the navy was "purely" Dutch. The sons of Mars were simply bought. At the siege of 's-Hertogenbosch, during the decisive phase of the battle for freedom, the army commanded by Vice Regent Frederick Henry was composed of three Dutch regiments (they were not at all volunteers), and fifteen regiments of Fresians, Walloons, Germans, French, Scotch, and English. In addition, this medley did not wear uniforms. A helmet, armor plate, sometimes a sash with the colors of the detachment—all of

this was very gray in comparison with the feathered splendor of the French or Italian warriors. There was nothing to paint.

Memories of wars paled quickly. The one who ordered a painting—ship captain, peasant, merchant, or artisan—wanted above all to see himself and the world that surrounded him: the house interior where the family gathered for the occasion of a baptism or wedding, a country road lined with trees and the glow of the afternoon sun falling on them, or a native town on a big plain.

Therefore it was not a very patriotic art, if by the word patriotism we understand the fierce hatred of all old, present, and even potential enemies. The Dutch did not leave us a single painting where a defeated adversary is dragged behind a victor's chariot in the dust of spite.

Yet they painted sea battles with such delight. The classical example of this genre is the work of Hendrik Vroom[6], "Battle at Gibraltar on April 25, 1607." In the foreground a Dutch warship pierces the hull of a Spanish flagship with its prow. The painting is small, and to speak in a not very tactful way, full of delightful details: red and yellow braids of explosions, people, remnants of masts flying into the air and drowning in the sea, thousands of small touches rendered with a miniature painter's precision. And all this seen as if through a telescope, from a distant perspective that dissolves horror and passion. A battle changed into a ballet, a colorful spectacle.

In one of his letters to Madame de Staël, Benjamin Constant enthusiastically speaks of Holland's history, so different from that of other European countries: "This brave nation never declared war on its neighbors, never invaded, never devastated or plundered their lands." (Constant passes in discreet silence over the colonial conquests, he speaks only about neighbors.) This remark of a French writer puts an essential feature of the Dutch character into relief. Someone said: "La Hollande est de religion d'Erasme[7]." It would not be a great exaggeration to say that the spirit of the philosopher from Rotterdam, who valued the virtues of moderation and gentleness above everything else, took power over this small nation.

ONE WINTER MORNING DURING a stroll in Berlin's Grunewald, I dropped by the Hunter's Castle. I knew for a long time that it housed a collection of Flemish and Dutch paintings. I entered partly out of duty, not expecting any revelations. I felt I would see one more mediocre collection (O the monotony of the second-rate painters of Great Schools!): portraits, hunting scenes, still lifes that hang on the walls of so many aristocratic residences. This is indeed what happened.

But I did not regret the visit, because I discovered what I had sought in so many representative galleries and museums for a long time. The painting was not a masterpiece at all, but its subject drew my attention: "Allegory of the Dutch Republic." It was painted by Jakob Adriaensz Backer[8], and for his work he received the not trifling sum of 300 guldens from the hands of Frederick Henry, Vice Regent of the United Provinces. Therefore, it was something like an official work.

The painting represents a young girl dressed in draperies of intense colors: red, blue, and a luminous pearly white. The model has a country look: the pink cheeks of a shepherdess, round shoulders, monumental legs firmly resting on the ground. Upon this personification of simplicity, freedom, and innocence the artist has imposed the heavy attributes of war: a helmet with a thick black plume, a shield in one hand and an operatic spear in the other. This is precisely what is most attractive in the painting: the contradiction between the elevated subject and its modest expression, as if a historical drama was played by a country troupe at a fair. The heroine of the scene does not resemble at all "Freedom leading people onto the barricades." Soon she will leave the boring task of posing and go to her everyday, nonpathetic occupations in a stable or on a haystack.

Freedom—so many treatises were written about it that it became a pale, abstract concept. But for the Dutch it was something as simple as breathing, looking, and touching objects. It did not need to be defined or beautified. This is why there is no division in their art between what is great and what

is small, what is important and unimportant, elevated and ordinary. They painted apples and the portraits of fabric shopkeepers, pewter plates and tulips, with such patience and such love that the images of other worlds and noisy tales about earthly triumphs fade in comparison.

APOCRYPHAS

THE MERCY OF THE EXECUTIONER

AMONG THE MANY portraits of Jan van Olden Barneveldt[1] I like most the one painted by an unknown master. The Great Pensionary is shown as an old man. Even the paint's substance carries the marks of disintegration, of mold, dust, and cobweb. Though not a beautiful face, it is full of expression and noble strength: a very high forehead, a large, meaty, not very shapely nose, a patriarchal beard, and under bushy eyebrows intelligent eyes where the desperate energy of someone trapped is glowing.

No historian denies that Barneveldt was one of the most meritorious founders of the new Republic. He was called Holland's defender. This first great politician, who came from the middle classes and represented their interests, knew how to defend the rights of the young state better than anyone else. He negotiated with the powerful monarchs of Spain, France, and England, prepared advantageous armistices, peace treaties, and alliances, and during the forty years of his life worked faithfully and untiringly for his country. But with the approach of old age his political sense began to fail. Barneveldt made crucial mistakes, and the culmination of these was a "sharp resolution" allowing towns to recruit mercenaries not subject to orders from the Prince of Orange, the true commander of the Republic's army. The country was on the threshold of civil war.

Barneveldt not only lost all sense of judgment in the situation, but his instinct of self-preservation abandoned him as well. He did not understand, or did not want to understand, that his handful of supporters was melting away and everyone was against him—the governor, the Estates General, and the

towns. Returning home from his office, he stepped with indifference over leaflets written against him. He did not listen to the advice of friends, who insisted that he resign and go abroad. He was like a large, old turtle dying on the sand, sinking deeper and deeper.

The finale was easy to guess, and surprising only to Barneveldt himself. Arrested after a months-long investigation, he stood before a special tribunal composed mostly of his enemies. Deprived of a lawyer, he furiously defended his honor rather than his life.

The time of the action: May 13, 1619. Place: The Hague, Binnenhof—a brick Gothic and Renaissance decoration of the drama. In the courtyard a wooden scaffold was hastily erected and sand strewn about. It was late afternoon. The fiery carriage of Helios—as rhetorical poets write—rolled westward. When they brought in the condemned man, the crowd fell silent. Barneveldt was hurrying toward death: "What you must do, do it fast," he urged the executors of the verdict.

Then something happened that went far beyond the ritual of execution, beyond the procedure of any known execution. The executioner led the condemned man to a spot where sunlight was falling and said, "Here, Your Honor, you will have sun on your face."

One might ask the question whether the executioner who cut off the head of the Great Pensionary was a good executioner. The goodness of the executioner depends on his ability to carry out his task quickly, efficiently, and in an impersonal way. Who more than he deserves to be called the executor of fate, or the soundless lightning of destiny? His virtues should be silence and cool restraint. He should administer the blow without hatred, without compassion, without any kind of emotion.

Barneveldt's executioner broke the rules of the game, left his role, and, what is more, violated the principles of professional ethics. Why did he do it? Certainly it was an impulse of the heart. But didn't the condemned man, who was stripped of all earthly glory, perceive derision in it? After all, it

is indifferent to those who are leaving forever whether they die in the sun, in shadow, or the darkness of night. The executioner, artisan of death, became an ambiguous figure filled with potential meaning when to the condemned man—in his last moment—he threw a crumb of helpless goodness.

THE CAPTAIN

ON DECEMBER 28TH, 1618, the sailboat *New Horn* left port on Texel Island, setting out on the long, dangerous journey to East India. The cargo was barrels of gunpowder. The ship's captain, William Ysbrantz Bontekoe[1], has described the history of this peculiar navigation.

His simple, severe, and at the same time naive narrative should be considered reliable. The only doubt comes from the way he presented an important episode of the expedition, especially because three different versions of the event have reached us that contradict one another.

Gales, lulls at sea, storms lasting several days, tropical downpours recalling the biblical deluge and sicknesses afflicting the crew, skirmishes with Spaniards—all this was daily bread for the sailors and contained within the limits of what was considered normal. This norm was over-stepped on the nineteenth of November 1619, in open sea and far from the goal of the journey.

That day Captain Bontekoe must have been in good humor; he ordered a double portion of aqua vitae to be given to the crew with its evening meal. Plunging into the darkness of the hold with a tallow candle's brightness, the mate in charge of food supplies pours alcohol from a barrel into a bucket. The weather is stormy. A sudden list of the ship, the candle falls straight into the open barrel of spirit. A moment of liberation of elemental force—then everything happens according to the logic of catastrophes. An avalanche of events rapidly succeeds each other until the culminating point, the powerful explosion annihilating the ship.

A small part of the crew is saved in a lifeboat and wanders over the ocean under a sail made of shirts. They have neither water nor food, drink their own urine, eat the raw meat of flying fish. The pitiless sun of the tropics consumes the mind, giving birth to a barbarian desire to kill a ship's boy and feed on his flesh and blood.

Captain Bontekoe sits at the back of the boat. With his arms he shades his head from the heat. He has a high fever and is delirious. But what happens now in front of his eyes is not delirium but reality. With his left hand the sailor called Red Joost grabs the hair of a ship's boy, who screams as if he were insane—armed with a knife, Joost's right hand rises in the air. Let us freeze this image.

According to the first version, Captain Bontekoe rose and delivered a long speech full of biblical citations. He spoke of Isaac's sacrifice, which as we know God rejected, about the Ten Commandments, the duty to love one's brother, and so on and so on. A surrealistic picture presents itself: a black pulpit hovering over the endless expanse of salty waters. In fact the boat, left to the mercy of the waves, was not the stony nave of a cathedral, and the handful of mad, shipwrecked sailors in no way recalled well-fed, festively bedecked burghers gathered for a Sunday service. The moment did not lend itself at all to displays of pious rhetoric. In order to prevent murder, one had to act quickly, decidedly, and violently.

The second report says that Bontekoe managed to convince Joost and restrain him from executing his criminal plan. They made a pact: If they did not manage to reach solid land in three days, the boy would be killed. That three-day deadline (the magic number three) was not based on any rational premises, because no one even vaguely knew the position of the boat. Besides, if the captain settled the matter this way, it was equivalent to consent to murder, and in fact meant only deferral of the sentence. Bontekoe took the side of the murderers; in a way he accepted their arguments.

Finally, the third version, and the one most probable. The captain jumps to his feet and shouts that whoever dares touch the boy will not receive his daily pay and food ration; when

they return to Amsterdam he will be hanged in front of the city walls on the highest gallows. This was a completely abstract threat if one takes into consideration the hopeless situation of the shipwrecked men, but its effect was staggering. To the sailors, mad with thirst and hunger, it restored a sense of moral order and presented before them a clear image of civilization: its foundation of food, money, and a wooden pole with a cross-beam at the top.

LONG GERRIT

GERRIT WAS BORN in a small village near Veere, and like all the men in his family he was destined for the vocation of fisherman. In the normal course of events, after a laborious life he would pass his boat and house on to his sons, while he would be content with two yards of bitter soil. But nature, which is usually so careful in allotting shapes to all its creatures, made him different. To the distress of his parents, he grew beyond measure; at seventeen he reached the height of eight feet and five inches. Undoubtedly he was the tallest man that ever walked Dutch soil. In a mountainous country it might have been somewhat concealed; here, on a broad plain, his height was a constant though unintended provocation.

Endowed with huge strength, he was normally quiet, gentle, and sad. He did not have friends; girls shunned him. Most of all he liked to sit in the corner of a room and watch how the dust of the earth swirled in a beam of sunlight.

Not particularly held back by his parents, Gerrit decided to set forth in the world and make a profession of his anomaly. He wandered from village to village, from town to town; at country fairs or popular holidays he broke horseshoes, bent iron bars, threw barrels full of beer into the air lightly as balls, and stopped a galloping horse with his naked hands. He competed hard with other wonders of nature: a pig with two heads, a six-legged dog, a horse that knew how to count, as well as magicians, tightrope walkers, swallowers of melted sulfur, and clowns with stuffed bellies who fell face-down in the mud.

Amid charlatans, fortune-tellers, and rat catchers, in a deafening racket of drums, trumpets, and the shouts of dancing processions, in the smells of meat, garlic, and sweet pastry

Gerrit towered high above like a mast—and let us admit it, he earned little. In his blue eyes lurked the worry of a father of a numerous family; Gerrit's numerous family was his huge, never-satiated body.

One autumn morning of 1688, Long Gerrit was found in an alley not far from the Nieuwe Gracht in Haarlem. He was lying with his face down. His doublet was soaked in rain and blood, he had been stabbed repeatedly with a knife. Most likely there were many murderers, and the cotton pouch with money on his chest led one to believe it was not a robbery. The body was given to the University of Leyden, so he did not even have a decent burial. A few preachers, however, mentioned the murder in their sermons; one of them who was carried away by rhetorical fervor said Gerrit was dealt as many blows as Julius Caesar. It is not clear why this elevated analogy was used.

Perhaps the preacher wanted us to understand that the healthy republican spirit bestows equal hatred on giants and on caesars.

PORTRAIT IN A BLACK FRAME

I DON'T KNOW WHY they kept choosing me, these elderly men who sat next to me in bars, cafés, on benches in parks. They made me listen to long monologues interspersed with the names of exotic islands and oceans. Who were they? Bankrupts, stripped of wealth and power. They played the role of exiled princes with the skill and routines of old actors. To their credit it must be said they were not sentimental. They knew they could not count on either applause or compassion; they separated themselves from the surrounding world with haughty spite.

They belonged to the same race and constituted what could be called a specific kind of human species. They were betrayed by predatory faces, also by clothes that had an old-fashioned, frayed elegance: a hat with a fantastic shape rescued from a deluge, a handkerchief in the breast pocket, a tie with a large pearl, a silk scarf that had aged with them and now recalled a rope wrapped around the neck.

As I listened to their tales I thought of a young twenty-year-old man who in 1607, a few days after Christmas, left on a ship of the Company of the Indies for the Far East. He was Jan Pieterszoon Coen[1], the son of a small merchant from Hoorn. Quite a task awaited him: inspecting the Dutch colonies in Java and the Moluccas, sending reports about prospects for commerce and the political situation in this faraway land where the influences of great colonial empires rubbed against one another. Such was the beginning of an epic, innocent and without significance.

It is difficult to say what prompted the Gentlemen of the Company to select this very young man without much experience. Was it the blind chance of fate, or was it his face

that decided the choice, a face with the traits of a Spanish warrior that we know from later portraits: stubborn, domineering, an impenetrable face.

The colonies were doing badly. Coen informed the Company of this in numerous reports, written with passion and the zeal of an apostle of white civilization. The population was demoralized and uncertain of its fate; stores, banking houses, forts, and harbors were in a deplorable state, corruption and drunkenness had reached appalling dimensions. All this took place before the eyes of the natives, who were waiting for the appropriate moment to cut the throats of the invaders.

This is why Coen demanded weapons and an army. "Your Excellencies," he wrote in one of his letters to the Company, "should know that we cannot conduct war without commerce, nor commerce without war." He also requested young, morally irreproachable and hardworking Dutch to be sent to the colonies. They would replace the degenerate desperadoes. He asked his superiors—it was an unheard-of thing—to send fourteen-year-old girls from Dutch orphanages who in the future would become virtuous wives for the colonizers.

Bursting with energy and ideas, omnipresent, tirelessly sailing between Borneo, Sumatra, the Celebes, and Java, Coen united in his personality the traits of a member of the Tribunal of Holy Inquisition and a conquistador. He was thirty when he was nominated governor-general of East India, a position that put almost unlimited power in his hands. Historical experience teaches us that it leads as a rule to crime.

It happened that a young ensign, Cortenhoeff, was caught flirting with a twelve-year-old pupil of the Governor, Saartje Specx. They were both natural children of the Company's employees, a couple of teenagers without a home or love. Personally and cold-bloodedly, Coen dictated a death sentence against them.

The affair of the expedition against the islands of Ambon and Banda became well known in Europe. During a military campaign fourteen out of fifteen thousand inhabitants of these islands were murdered, and seven hundred sold into slavery. Some maintain that the real cause of the massacre was the

local governor, Sonck, and Coen only gave the order for evacuation of the natives. The word “evacuation” was understood as a final evacuation and removal to the other world. Such semantic misunderstandings occur only in countries ruled by an iron hand.

The solitude of the strong man: Coen did not have friends. Strictly speaking he had only one; it was a shameful and deeply hidden friendship.

The great governor sneaked out at night with no bodyguard, walked the narrow streets of Batavia that were built like Amsterdam (steep roofs on the houses, canals, bridges, senseless mills milling the tropical heat), and would reach a rather dingy building where the Chinese Souw Bing Kong lived, a former ship captain and now banker—to speak more precisely, a moneylender.

What did they talk about? About accounting, which was the hidden passion, even the love of the governor. Bing Kong would reveal the secrets of the Chinese method of business bookkeeping, and Coen would sing the charms of Italian bookkeeping. After a day filled with hard work, the administrator of the Dutch colony felt relief, comfort, almost a physical happiness when he thought of the white sheets of paper and two columns of numbers under the rubrics “owes” and “has” they ordered a complex, dark world just like the ethical categories of good and evil. Bookkeeping for Coen was the highest form of poetry—it liberated the hidden harmony of things.

He died in the prime of life, struck by tropical fever. The end came so suddenly he had no time to prepare a testament, or give last instructions. One might say he choked on death, but did not drink it to the end. This is probably why for long centuries he took the shape of other predators, all the way up to those I met in bars, in coffeehouses, and on park benches, the last of the species.

THE HELL OF INSECTS

JAN SWAMMERDAM WAS frail and sickly since birth. He was kept alive only by the art of two eminent physicians. But efforts to awaken his sleepy humors brought no results. In school he studied well but without enthusiasm; he did not show any definite interests. His father owned the prospering pharmacy By the Swan next to the town hall in Amsterdam; soon he became reconciled to the thought—but not without regret—that after his death his beautiful shop filled with smells of botany and chemistry, a collection of natural oddities, and a crocodile hanging from the ceiling, would pass into the hands of a stranger.

After long hesitation Jan decided to study medicine at the University of Leyden. The family praised his intention and promised appropriate material aid, nourishing the quiet hope that a change of environment and scholarly discipline would positively influence and toughen the wishy-washy character of their only child.

Jan succumbed to the charms of knowledge, and in an exaggerated way—he studied everything. He attended lectures on mathematics, theology, and astronomy; he did not neglect seminars where they read texts of ancient authors; he was also enthusiastic about Oriental languages. He gave the least attention to his chosen domain of knowledge, medicine.

“God is sorely trying your father,” wrote Jan’s mother, “adding worries about his son’s fate to the torments of old age. You are wasting the priceless time of youth as if wandering through a forest instead of pursuing a straight path toward your goal. If within two years you do not receive a doctor’s diploma, your father will stop sending money. Such is his will.”

Jan finished medicine. But during his entire life he did not dress a single wound. The new passion that never left him until death was the study of the world of insects. Entomology did not yet exist as a separate domain of science; Jan Swammerdam[1] established its foundations.

However, the study of the antennae of the dung beetle, of the digestive system of the wasp, of the legs of the mosquito did not bring Jan either revenue or fame. To make things worse, he was convinced he was wasting his life, devoting it to a barren and useless occupation. Religious, with inclinations toward mysticism, Swammerdam suffered because the objects of his studies were creatures on the lowest rung of the ladder of species, on the garbage heap of nature, in a neighborhood close to the hot vestibule of hell. Who can perceive God's finger in the anatomy of a louse? Is not the one-day damsel fly a splinter of nothingness rather than a permanent brick of existence? Therefore he envied astronomers, who could study the movements of planets and discover the architecture of the universe, the laws of harmony, and the will of the Eternal.

At night he was visited by messengers from the Heavens. They gently persuaded him to abandon his frivolous occupations. Swammerdam did not defend himself, only apologized. He promised to reform, but he knew he would never have the courage to burn his manuscripts, his beautiful, precise drawings and observations. Angels who know the secrets of the heart left him, and then a pandemonium would begin: small creatures flying low, crawling on the ground, with devils' faces and the devil's fierceness; they dragged Swammerdam's tortured soul down into dust and ruin.

The fates smiled on him only once, and ambiguously at that. The Prince of Tuscany proposed 12,000 florins for his collection of insects on condition that Swammerdam come and live in Florence—a tempting proposition—and that he accept Catholicism. This last condition was unacceptable for a man tortured by conflicts of conscience. He rejected the magnanimous offer.

A few years before his death (he died at the age of forty-three) he looked like a decrepit old man. Swammerdam's weak

body resisted for a strangely long time, as if death despised its miserable prey and sentenced him to a long agony.

He experienced then that the world he had studied descended inside him: it nestled there and ravaged him from within. Long trains of ants marched through the corridors of his veins, swarms of bees drank the bitter nectar of his heart, large gray and brown moths slept on his eyes. The soul that usually flies to infinity at the moment of death left Swammerdam's tortured body prematurely. It could not bear the rustle of the wing cases, nor the senseless buzzing that disturbs the pure music of the Universe.

PERPETUUM MOBILE

CORNELIS DREBBEL[1] WAS a famous inventor and scholar, but his colleagues treated him with reserve, reproaching him for lack of seriousness. It is a fact he was more inclined to spectacular demonstrations of his numerous abilities than to carry out systematic research. This is probably why no university ever offered him a chair. The royal courts, however, adored him.

In 1604 he appeared in England. Within a short time he won the sympathy of the higher spheres and the monarch himself; the material proof of this was an annual pension, paid from the royal purse, and an apartment in Eltham Palace. Drebbel then became what might be called a full-time manufacturer of unusual things and phenomena: a supplier of miracles, producer of bewilderment and vertigo.

According to contemporary accounts, two events in particular (among many) caused a real sensation and remained for a long time in human memory: a demonstration of the navigation of a submarine, constructed by the inventor, which traveled from Westminster to Greenwich without emerging from the waters of the Thames; and a great meteorological pageant in Westminster Hall in London before the king, court, and invited guests. At the pageant Drebbel's machine hurled out thunder and lightning; suddenly in the middle of summer it became so freezing that walls were covered with frost and those who were present shivered from cold; at the end a warm, heavy rain fell and everyone melted in delight. There was no end to the applause in honor of this man who, by the power of his genius, made nature's forces compliant to his will.

Drebbel's head was full of ideas both big and small, serious and ridiculous, intelligent and completely insane. He

constructed a special ladder to help obese people mount a horse, he worked out a new system to drain marshy terrain, he built flying machines (malicious people called them falling machines), he made a small hammer to hit parasites on the head that was connected to tweezers which pulled the victim from the hair, he invented a sensational technological process for dyeing fabrics, also an effigy that could be set in the wind and emit frightening cries and moans. This is just a small number of the inventions of this man of unusual resourcefulness.

Who was he in fact, a charlatan or scholar? Because we cannot look inside his soul, which has resided for a long time in the other world, we must concentrate our attention on what he left on earth. Drebbel's library in particular, a true curiosity, provides valuable indications for those who want to study the nature of his intellect, fertile, with strokes of genius and undisciplined at the same time.

The very arrangement of the books makes one think that Drebbel read scholarly works together with treatises by alchemists. The writings of Bacon, Leonardo da Vinci, and Giordano Bruno stood side by side with Paracelsus, *The Seventh Veil of Isis, The Temple of Hiram*, and *The Amphitheater of Eternal Wisdom*. The weed of gnosis was rampant in the garden of the natural sciences. On the margins of dissertations in the field of mechanics, chemistry, and ballistic science Drebbel drew esoteric diagrams and wrote the sonorous names of the cabala: Binah, Geburah, and Kether, which mean Intelligence, Force, and the Crown of Knowledge.

Drebbel thought the world could not be explained in purely scientific categories, that sometimes the immutable laws of nature are not obligatory, making room for miracles and dazzling wonder. Probably this is why he built a perpetual-motion machine, improving it throughout his life (he realized his enterprise was hopeless from the physicist's point of view). One has to admit that on this path of madness he obtained certain results. His pendulums, windmills, spheres of light metal with weights hanging from them moved for a long time indeed, and when movement stopped the inventor pushed them

with a finger, like a demiurge, awakening sleepy matter from a nap.

After centuries when my bones have crumbled—Drebbel thought—and even my name has dissolved in mist, someone will find my clock eternally striking. I don't count on human memory but on the memory of the universe. I want my existence to be proved like the existence of God, with an unmistakable and infallible proof: from movement, *ex motu*.

HOME

ONE CAN SAY with slight but certainly not great exaggeration that before travel began, a map existed first. Just as originally the hazy and impersonal outline of a poem drifts in the air for a long time before someone dares bring it to earth, giving it a shape understandable to men. Thus maps, the music of sirens' songs and challenges for the daring, suggested to the Dutch a bold plan to navigate to China by a northern passage: a dark, narrow, icy corridor rather than the commonly used tropical route, full of murderous pirates and equally murderous competitors.

The matter must have been treated in full seriousness, because the Estates General established an award of 25,000 florins for whoever would successfully realize this intention bordering on madness. Two experienced men of the sea, Captain Jacob van Heemskerk[1] and the pilot Willem Barents[2], set out with a crew and two ships on a great reconnaissance. It was May 1597. The green strip of land quickly disappeared from view, and after barely three weeks the sailors were surrounded by an inconceivable polar world. On June 5 one of the deck hands shouted that he saw a flock of huge white swans on the horizon. These were actually mountains of ice. The sailor's mistake indicates not so much poetic imagination as a poor knowledge of polar hell.

After many dramatic episodes, adversities of weather and fate, struggles with an ever more incomprehensible environment (these wonders increased gradually, allowing partial adaptation), less than four months after leaving Holland further navigation became impossible. The ships were imprisoned by autumn ice on the shore of Novaya Zemlya. A

decision was made to winter there. For this they needed a house.

By happy coincidence they found wood on the island, brought by ocean currents from Siberian forests. It was hard as rock, but they managed with this resistant material. The ship's carpenter died at the beginning of construction; the frozen earth did not want to accept his mortal remains, and his body was buried in a crevasse of ice. Time was running out—the days were shorter and shorter, the temperature fell in an appalling way. Those who worked on the construction complained that when they put nails in their mouth according to the carpenter's custom, they froze to their lips and had to be torn off with the skin.

On the third of November the last board was finally nailed to the roof. The happy sailors decorated their home with a branch formed out of snow.

So here was the house: a miniature of their homeland, a shelter from frost and the polar bears that hunted the Dutchmen. There was hardly a day they did not meet them eye-to-eye. Rifles, flintlocks, muskets, halberds, and fire were used but did not help much; the stubbornness and persistance of all these animals were almost human as they suddenly appeared like white, bloodthirsty phantoms, climbing the roof and trying to enter through the chimney. They sniffed and panted threateningly at the house's door.

The chronicler of the expedition rarely permits himself to express emotions except for pious sighs to the Creator. At one point in his report he adopts the emotional term "beast" for the bear, and uses it until the end. In the middle of a polar night the bears' siege came to an end and polar foxes appeared; the chronicler has a tender and warm term for them, "creatures." They obediently entered the traps that were set, provided meat (it tasted like rabbit) and fur. Once again it was shown that the mythical brotherhood of men with those on all fours contains a certain dose of hypocrisy.

On earth that was not destined for man in God's plans, on the cruel, dazzlingly white and blindingly black chessboard of fate, stood a house. A fire set in the fireplace gave more smoke

than warmth. Icy wind played in cracks caulked with moss. Sick with scurvy and consumed with fever, the men lay on bunks that hung from the walls, snow burying the small house with its chimney. The polar night confused all measures of time and reality. At the end of January, the sailors succumbed to a collective hallucination just like that of wanderers in the desert who have visions of an oasis—they saw an unreal sun above the horizon. But the funereal darkness of polar night was still to last for a long time.

It would be a mistake to think the hibernation of the Dutch was a kind of passive resistance. On the contrary, the energy that sparked from them is cause for admiration. They were busy, bustling like good Frisian peasants on their barren holdings. They carried wood for the fire, nursed sick companions, repaired the house; some of them wrote about the peculiarities of the surrounding world. They hunted, intricately practiced culinary arts, read the Bible aloud, entered four to a barrel while the ship's barber poured hot water over them. He also cut their hair, which grew amazingly fast, as if the body wanted to cover itself with fur. They sewed clothes and shoes from the hides of the animals they caught, sang pious and indecent songs. They repaired a clock that constantly froze, a clock that was consolation that time is not an abyss or black mask of nothingness but can be divided into a human yesterday and a human tomorrow—into a day without light and a night without glimmer, seconds, hours, and weeks, into doubt that goes away and hope that is born.

He who struggles with the elements in a deadly contest, with an adversary a hundred times stronger, realizes he has a chance only if he concentrates all his attention, will, and cunning to counter the blows. It requires a special reduction of the entire personality, a degradation to animal impulses dictated by instinct. It is necessary to forget who one used to be. What counts is only the very moment of thunder, fire, storm, blizzard, and earthquake. Any human surplus, any superfluous thought, feeling, or gesture can bring catastrophe.

The handful of Dutch sailors exposed to the utmost ordeal transgressed these iron rules at least two times. They added a human accent to the laws of struggle with impersonal nature.

But perhaps it was not just a risky extravagance or sentimental song about attachment sung in the icy wilderness, but an important element of self-defense. Both events are related to their new home. Because—after all—it was a home.

On January 6, 1598, the day of Epiphany, without paying any attention to what was happening outside, the shipwrecked men decided to celebrate the holiday as in their homeland. Even sober Captain van Heemskerk gave in to the madness, ordering a sizable portion of wine and two pounds of flour to be measured out to the crew from diminishing supplies; with this they baked a plum cake and biscuits. The mulled wine with spices put the crew in such high spirits that they started to dance; many times they went through their favorite "bungler," a hat dance, and a reel. They arranged a contest to decide who would become the Emperor of Novaya Zemlya, and selected an Almond King[3]. He was a very young sick sailor, Jacob Schiedam, who died soon afterward, but on that memorable evening he smiled for the last time, to his companions rather than the world. The chronicler says everything took place as it did with their dear ones in Holland, which he summons only once with the solemn incantation "patria."

It is not known who first had the idea—it might have been a product of collective imagination—but when the house was finally built (to tell the truth, it was a doghouse) they decided to give it some style. A triangular portal was painted in black over the low door, and two windows were placed symmetrically on the front wall (the house was without windows). An eave made from shipboards was arranged in tiers and nailed to a flat roof. Soon it was swept away by a snowstorm, clearly hostile to these aesthetic subtleties.

When on June 13, 1598, they started back on two wretched boats, no one had the courage to look back at the deserted home—that monument to fidelity with a triangular portal and two false windows where pitchy darkness lurked.

SPINOZA'S BED

IT IS AN amazing thing that our memory best retains images of great philosophers when their lives were coming to an end. Socrates raising the chalice with hemlock to his mouth, Seneca whose veins were opened by a slave (there is a painting of this by Rubens), Descartes roaming cold palace rooms with a foreboding that his role of teacher of the Swedish queen would be his last, old Kant smelling a grated horse-radish before his daily walk (the cane preceding him, sinking deeper and deeper into the sand), Spinoza consumed by tuberculosis and patiently polishing lenses, so weak he is unable to finish his Treatise on the Rainbow…A gallery of noble moribunds, pale masks, plaster casts.

In the eyes of his biographer, Spinoza was unmistakably an ideal wise man: exclusively concentrated on the precise architecture of his works, perfectly indifferent to material affairs, and liberated from all passions. But an episode in his life is passed over in silence by some biographers, while others consider it only an incomprehensible, youthful whim.

Spinoza's father died in 1656. In his family Baruch had the reputation of an eccentric young man who had no practical sense and wasted precious time studying incomprehensible books. Due to clever intrigues (his stepsister, Rebecca, and her husband, Casseres, played the main role) he was deprived of his inheritance. She hoped the absentminded young man would not even notice. But it happened otherwise.

Baruch initiated a lawsuit in court with an energy no one suspected him to have. He hired lawyers, called witnesses, was both matter-of-fact and passionate, extremely well-oriented in the most subtle details of procedure and convincing as a son injured and stripped of his rights.

They settled the division of the estate relatively quickly; clear legal rules existed in this matter. But then a second act of the trial unexpectedly followed, causing a general sense of unpleasantness and embarrassment.

As if the devil of possessiveness had entered him, Baruch began to litigate over almost each object from his father's house. It started with the bed in which his mother, Deborah, had died (he did not forget about its dark-green curtains). Then he requested objects without any value, explaining that he had an emotional attachment to them. The judges were monumentally bored, and could not understand where this irresistible desire in the ascetic young man came from. Why did he wish to inherit a poker, a pewter pot with a broken handle, an ordinary kitchen stool, a china figure representing a shepherd without a head, a broken clock that stood in the vestibule and was a home for mice, or a painting over the fireplace so completely blackened it looked like a self-portrait of tar?

Baruch won the trial. He could now sit with pride on his pyramid of spoils, casting spiteful glances at those who tried to disinherit him. But he did not do this. He only chose his mother's bed (with the dark-green curtains), giving the rest away to his adversaries defeated at the trial.

No one understood why he acted this way. It seemed an obvious extravagance, but in fact had a deeper meaning. It was as if Baruch wanted to say that virtue is not at all an asylum for the weak. The art of renunciation is an act of courage—it requires the sacrifice of things universally desired (not without hesitation and regret) for matters that are great and incomprehensible.

LETTER

IT WAS ACCIDENTALLY discovered in the 1920s—to be exact, in 1924-in an antique-book shop in Leyden. Three sheets of cream-colored paper of the dimensions 11.5 by 17 centimeters, with traces of humidity, but the handwriting well preserved, the small, clear letters completely readable. An unknown person had pasted the letter onto the inside of the cover of an old, once very popular romance called The Knight with a Swan, published in 1651 by the Amsterdam firm of Cool.

The majority of scholars have written skeptically about this discovery—for example, Isarlo, Gillet, Clark, De Vries, Borrero, and Goldschneider; only a young poet and historian from Utrecht, van der Velde (later stabbed with a dagger in mysterious circumstances not far from Scheveningen), fiercely defended the authenticity of the letter to the end of his life. According to the young scholar, its author was none other than Johannes Vermeer, and its recipient Anton van Leeuwenhoek[1], a naturalist whose merits in the field of improving the microscope are well known. The scholar and the artist were both born in the same year, the same day, and spent their entire lives in the same city.

The letter shows no traces of corrections or subsequent interpolations, but it contains two spelling mistakes and changes; obviously it must have been written in a hurry. A few lines have been crossed out so decidedly and energetically that we will never learn what foolish or shameful thoughts were covered forever by the blackness of the ink.

The handwriting with its pointed letters, “v” written like an open eight, a somewhat wavy movement of the pen as if someone was speeding up and then suddenly stopping, reveals

a striking similarity if not identity with the only preserved signature of Vermeer in the register of Saint Luke's Guild in 1662. Chemical analysis of the paper and ink allows us to date the document at the second half of the seventeenth century. Everything indicates, then, that the letter could have been written by Vermeer's hand, yet we lack irrefutable proofs. We know that technically perfect falsifications have been made.

All those who spoke against the authenticity of the document put forward numerous arguments, but to tell the truth, they are not too convincing. Scholarly prudence and even far-reaching skepticism are undoubtedly praiseworthy virtues. But one could sense something between the lines of the critical remarks that no one clearly stated: the main reservations were caused by the letter's content. Let us suppose that if Vermeer wrote to his mother-in-law, Maria Tins, asking her to lend him a hundred florins for the baptism of his son, Ignatius, or let us also imagine if he offered one of his paintings to his baker van Buyten as a guarantee against a debt, I believe no one would protest. But when after two and a half centuries the Great Mute speaks with his own voice, and what he says is an intimate confession—a manifesto and a prophecy—we don't want to accept it because we have a great fear before a revelation, and withhold of consent to a miracle.

Here is the letter:

> *Undoubtedly You will be surprised I am writing rather than simply dropping by your laboratory before dusk, as so often happens. But I think I do not have enough courage, I do not know how to tell you to your face what you will read in a moment.*
>
> *I would prefer not to write this letter. I hesitated for a long time, because I really did not want to expose our long friendship to danger. Finally I made up my mind to do it. There are, after all, things more important than what unites us, more important than Leeuwenhoek, more important than Vermeer.*
>
> *A few days ago you showed me a drop of water under your new microscope. I always thought it was pure like glass, while in reality strange creatures swirl in it like in*

Bosch's transparent hell. During this demonstration you watched my consternation intently, and I think with satisfaction. Between us there was silence. Then you said very slowly and deliberately: "Such is water, my dear, such and not otherwise."

I understood what you wanted to say: that we artists record appearances, the life of shadows and the deceptive surface of the world; we do not have the courage or ability to reach the essence of things. We are craftsmen, so to speak, who work in the matter of illusion, while you and those like you are the masters of truth.

As you know my father owned the tavern Mechelen at the marketplace. An old sailor often came there who had wandered all over the world, from Indochina to Brazil and from Madagascar to the Arctic Ocean. I remember him well. He was always quite tipsy but told splendid stories, and everyone gladly listened to him. He was the attraction of the place, like a big colorful picture or exotic animal. One of his favorite stories was about the Chinese emperor Shi Huang-ti.

This emperor ordered his country to be surrounded by a thick wall, in order to shut out everything that was different. He burned all books so he would not have to listen to the admonishing voice of the past; he forbade cultivation of any of the arts under penalty of death. (Their complete uselessness was blatantly clear when they were compared to such important tasks of state as building a fortress, or cutting off rebels' heads.) Thus poets, painters, and musicians hid in the mountains and remote monasteries; they led the life of exiles tracked by a pack of informers. On the squares piles of paintings were burned, fans, statues, ornate fabrics, objects of luxury, and all things that could be considered pretty. Men, women, and children all wore the same ash-colored clothes. The emperor declared war even on flowers; he ordered their fields to be buried under stones. A special decree announced that at sunset everyone was to be at home, the windows tightly covered with black curtains

because (you know yourself) what incredible pictures can be painted by the wind, clouds, and the light of sunset.

The emperor valued only science. He showered scientists with honors and gold. Every day astronomers would bring news of the discovery of a new or imaginary star. In servile fashion it was given the name of the emperor, and soon the entire firmament teemed with the luminous points of Shi Huang-ti I, Shi Huang-ti II, Shi Huang-ti III, and so on. Mathematicians labored to invent new numerical systems, complicated equations, and unimaginable geometrical figures, knowing only too well their labors were sterile, of no use to anyone. Naturalists promised they would develop a tree whose crown was embedded in the ground and whose roots reached the sky, also a wheat grain as large as a fist.

At last the emperor wished for immortality. Physicians performed cruel experiments on men and animals to discover the secret of the eternal heart, the eternal liver, eternal lungs.

As it often happens with men of action, the emperor desired to change the face of the earth and sky so his name would be inscribed forever in the memory of future generations. He did not understand that the life of an ordinary peasant, shoemaker, or grocer was far more worthy of respect and admiration, while he himself was becoming a bloodless letter, a symbol among countless symbols of madness and violence monotonously repeating themselves.

After all the crimes, all the devastation he caused in human minds and souls, his own death was cruelly banal: he choked on a single grape. To remove him from the surface of the earth, nature did not exert herself to produce a hurricane or deluge.

Probably you will ask: Why do I tell you all this, and what is the connection between the story of the foreign ruler and your drop of water? I will most likely answer you not very clearly or coherently, hoping you will

understand the words of a man who is full of forebodings and anxiety.

I am afraid that you and others like you are setting out on a dangerous journey that might bring humanity not only advantages but also great, irreparable harm. Haven't you noticed that the more the means and tools of observation are perfected, the more distant and elusive become the goals? With each new discovery a new abyss opens. We are more and more lonely in the mysterious void of the universe.

I know that you want to lead men out of the labyrinths of superstition and chance, that you want to give them certain, clear knowledge, which according to you is the only defense against fear and anxiety. But will it really bring us relief if we substitute the word necessity for the word Providence?

Most likely you will reproach me that our art does not solve any of the enigmas of nature. Our task is not to solve enigmas, but to be aware of them, to bow our heads before them and also to prepare the eyes for never-ending delight and wonder. If you absolutely require discoveries, however, I will tell you that I am proud to have succeeded in combining a certain particularly intensive cobalt with a luminous, lemonlike yellow, as well as recording the reflection of southern light that strikes through thick glass onto a gray wall.

The tools we use are indeed primitive: a stick with a bunch of bristles attached to the end, a rectangular board, pigments and oils. These have not changed for centuries, like the human body and nature. If I understand my task, it is to reconcile man with surrounding reality. This is why I and my guild brothers repeat an infinite number of times the sky and clouds, the portraits of men and cities, all these odds and ends of the cosmos, because only there do we feel safe and happy.

Our paths part. I know I will not convince you, and that you will not abandon polishing lenses or erecting your Tower of Babel. But allow us as well to continue our

archaic procedure, to tell the world words of reconciliation and to speak of joy from recovered harmony, of the eternal desire for reciprocated love.

EPILOGUE

CORNELIS TROOST, TEXTILE merchant and unknown hero of history, is dying.

It is not true our entire life appears in front of our eyes before death. That great recapitulation of existence is an invention of the poets. In fact we sink into chaos. Within Cornelis Troost[1] there is a confusion of days and nights, he does not distinguish Monday from Sunday, he confuses three in the afternoon with four in the morning; when he is alert he waits, listening to his own breathing and his heart. He asks for a clock to be put on a table in front of his bed, as if hoping he will experience the grace of cosmic order. But what is nine o'clock if it does not mean sitting at the desk in the office, the noon hour without the stock exchange, four o'clock from which dinner is taken away, six o'clock without coffee and a pipe, eight o'clock deprived of all meaning because they have removed the table, supper, family, and friends. O holy ritual of everydayness, without you time is empty like a falsified inventory that corresponds to no real objects.

The angels of death keep vigil at his bed. Soon the naked soul of Cornelis Troost will stand before the Highest Judge to account for his deeds. We who know little about divine matters are interested in a human, unimportant question: Was he happy?

Friendly fate led him by the hand that memorable April day when half a century earlier he wandered through huge, noisy Amsterdam, clutching a letter that recommended him to a relative who was a shoemaker. It contained a request to kindly accept the boy and teach him the profession. That letter, conceived by a teacher in the country, had only one drawback: there was no address.

Then, as it happens only in fairy tales, a handsome man dressed in black appeared before the lost boy: Baltazar Jong, a textile merchant who without asking many questions took him to his house, gave him a bed in the attic, and entrusted him with the responsible function of message boy. Thus without effort or merits Cornelis passed from the purgatory of twine and lasts—which seemed to be his destiny—to the heaven of silks and laces. Such was the beginning of a stunning career, as it is only a natural course of events and not a career when the son of a mayor becomes mayor and the son of an admiral becomes an admiral.

Cornelis Troost commendably passed all the steps of the merchants' profession. He was a conscientious and zealous apprentice, scribe, warehouseman, accountant, salesman favored by the ladies because of his constantly pink cheeks, finally a kind of personal secretary of Jong. Then he changed his quarters from the attic, which meant he was now treated as a member of the family, not numerous but honest and consisting of the master, the lady of the house, and a daughter.

At about this time he performed an unusual deed: carrying an important, confidential message, he skated the distance from Amsterdam to Leyden in less than an hour along frozen canals. (Ungrateful human memory has not recorded this fact as it deserved.) Mr. Jong took care to put a healthy soul in the healthy body of his pupil. He sent him to dancing lessons, taught him the flute and a few Latin proverbs. The one Cornelis liked most was *Hic Rhodus, hic salta*, and he would insert it in his conversations with important persons only too often, sometimes even without much sense.

Mr. Jong was a man of broad horizons, educated and subtle. He had collected a sizable library. The classics stood in the first rows, while shamefully hidden behind them were passionate accounts of faraway voyages that were to push his grandson to the stormy life of an adventurer. He bought paintings, and was interested in astronomy. In the evening he strummed a guitar and read Latin poets; he preferred, however, his native Vondel. He systematically enlarged his collection of minerals. Above all he adored Livy, oysters, Italian opera, and light Rhine wines. His sudden death plunged his family and

friends in genuine sadness. He died as stylishly as he lived—at a full table, as he was lifting a sponge cake dipped in wine to his mouth.

Without waiting for tears to dry, Cornelis Troost asked for the hand of the daughter of his deceased master, Anna. He was not moved by a mercenary motive, at least he did not think so, although at the same time he realized he had entered his adopted family not by the front door but by the attic. At this moment he felt as noble as Perseus, who frees Andromeda chained to the rock of an orphan's mourning.

His proposal was accepted (who could better lead the business of the firm?) and the wedding was arranged quickly (the malicious said too quickly). It was not too ostentatious, as circumstances did not allow it, but the tables bent under the food and beverages. Because of an excessive number of toasts washed down with wine, grain spirits, rum, and beer, Cornelis spent the wedding night in a state of complete unconsciousness.

A year after the wedding an only son was born, given the name of Jan at baptism.

The firm (it carried now the name "Jong, Troost and Son") was doing excellent business, thanks not only to favorable conditions but above all to Troost's talents and his unusual merchant's intuition. Born a peasant, he knew his countrymen were conservative to the marrow of their bones. One would think the owner of a large textile store would be interested in fashion. Troost simply ignored it, considering it a nuisance, like a runny nose that from time to time bothers an organism full of healthy habits and tastes. If he paid attention to the "latest rages" of fashion, it was only in the domain of accessories: ribbons, shoulder straps, buckles, and eventually feathers. He firmly believed that true elegance does not demand a broken line or richness of colors but is satisfied with the calm, simple line of a cut, as well as noble black, purple, and white. He was also, if one may say so, an ardent patriot of native industry. He was convinced—and persuaded his clients—that the best wool comes from Leyden, the cotton from Haarlem has no competition, Amsterdam's silk fabrics are

truly without equal, and there are no better velvets on earth than those from Utrecht.

Cornelis Troost, owner of the firm "Jong, Troost and Son," worked untiringly six days a week, but he devoted Sundays and holidays entirely to his family. From early spring until late fall, after hearing a service the Troosts would set out on faraway excursions to the Three Oaks, the dunes, or to an inn, De Zwaan, situated in a picturesque and secluded spot. Here is a picture: Cornelis marches in front (always some hundred feet ahead, as if bursting with the memory of his old skating exploits), silent Anna is walking with small steps behind him. The servant with a basket of monstrous dimensions full of victuals, and small noisy Jan, riding a cart harnessed to a goat, close the procession. Both parents spoiled their only child beyond all imagination. A rest. Lunch in the shade of old elms: cream, wild strawberries, cherries, rye bread, butter, cheese, wine, and cake.

In the early afternoon the family would come to the inn De Zwaan, famous for its excellent cuisine and situated near a major road crossing. Gallows stood there; one could tactfully go around them by choosing a path through the meadows. Inside the inn it was always crowded and noisy. Heavy odors of tobacco, lamb fat, and beer wafted in the air. Cornelis Troost usually ordered *hutspot*—one could not find a better one in all the United Provinces—a salmon in green sauce, incomparable crepes, and candied chestnuts (he would put them thoughtfully in his pocket, fearing a sudden attack of hunger on the way back). Washed down with a double beer from Delft, all this put body and soul in a state of satiated melancholy.

The return would take place slowly, in reverse order: Jan rode in front, next to him the servant freed from her burden, behind them Anna fearfully looking back, and at the end Cornelis, who would frequently stop. As if suddenly struck by the beauty of existence and the loveliness of nature, he craned his neck and greeted the passing clouds with loud singing not completely concordant with principles of harmony:

Good evening, good evening,

my dear Joosje

or:

Lush oaklands, lovely crags

Noble witnesses of my pleasures

If now or several years later Cornelis Troost was asked whether he was happy, he would not have known what to answer. Happy people, just as people who are healthy, do not ponder about their own condition.

O wonderful clock measuring weekdays and holidays! It is true that Cornelis Troost never stood in the blinding glare of great historical events. But could one say that in the drama of the world he played a secondary role? He met his fate of textile merchant as others meet their roles of warriors, heretics, or statesmen. He rubbed against history only once, fleetingly, as in a dance—it happened during the visit of a foreign monarch.

At that time Troost was an elder of the guild, and he went to the town hall for the welcoming ceremony wearing an orange sash, yellow ribbons below his knees and at his shoulders. He wore a fanciful hat decorated with black ostrich feathers that with every breath of wind almost took flight. From the depths of his heart he hated these clothes, pompous as costumes of opera singers, but he did not regret this masquerade, because he saw the monarch face-to-face—that is, from a human perspective. Later he repeated an endless number of times: “I saw him quite close, and you know he is pale, fat, small, about half a head shorter than me.” He was bursting with great republican pride.

After the reception there was a procession in honor of the monarch, combined with shooting into the innocent sky. For the second time Troost had an occasion to try out his beautiful Florentine rifle. The first time it happened in his own garden

when he fired at an owl suspected of disturbing the peace at night. The stock of the rifle was decorated with an engraving of “The Judgment of Paris” against a background of a vast mountainous landscape. Cornelis valued this part of the weapon most, considering the metal pipe a superfluous addition.

After these historical events life continued to roll in its ordinary groove. Business went splendidly, but Jan gave his parents constant troubles and worries: he did not study, ran away from home, and preferred the company of total scoundrels. The prodigal son always returned to the bosom of the family, however, where a biblical scene took place, full of tears, repentance, and forgiveness. It seemed that in the end matters would settle down favorably for everyone. Only, Anna was getting weak, and so it was decided to accept a third servant; among many candidates a young Frisian peasant by the name of Judith was selected.

Her beauty was not dazzling, but it awoke in the soul of the master of the house hazy, sweet memories of distant childhood. He liked her very much, and gave her ribbons and barrettes matching her red, fluffy hair, asking her not to tell anyone about it. He persuaded his wife to permit Judith to help him in the store in the evening. It might have happened two or three times that they stayed alone and locked the door with a key. But the bad tongues of the neighbors gossiped about the scandal. Anna suffered ostentatiously but in silence.

Cornelis started to go more often to the barber. He played the flute for hours. He became talkative, loud, and excessively gay. One day he confided to Anna that he wanted to order a portrait. A painter was recommended who lived on the Rozengracht. He was, or else had been, a fashionable portrait painter and was also known for his religious scenes. Festively dressed, Cornelis went to him: the name escaped his memory, but passersby showed him the house. The painter received him not too politely. He had closely set, piercing eyes, and the thick hands of a butcher. He was dressed in a long, stained apron and had a strange turban on his head. All of this would have been bearable, but the price for the portrait that this boor gave him—300 florins—confused Cornelis (he immediately

calculated it against yards of good woolen fabric). An embarrassing silence followed.

At last the painter declared that he could portray Cornelis as a Pharisee, and then the price would be considerably lower. At this point it was the hurt pride of the textile merchant that took over. He wanted to be represented as he was, at the peak of success, in a gentle glow of happiness but without unnecessary symbols and decorations, with his own large head surrounded by luxuriant hair, his keen eyes looking into the future with confidence, a thick nose, the mouth of a gourmet, and also strong hands, resting near the frame of the painting, in which one could entrust not only the business matters of the firm "Jong, Troost and Son" but also the fate of the city (at the time, Cornelis dreamt of being mayor). It is not surprising that the contract for the painting was never signed. Later, someone gave him the name of another famous portrait painter from Haarlem; but he did not contact him, because his mind was preoccupied with serious problems and worries.

One never knows when or from where a storm will come that shakes the foundations of a house (and it seemed to be eternal), and in the sudden flash of lightning show the emptiness of plans arduously put together during an entire life. Jan, the only son, the hope and future heir of the firm, ran away from home for good. He left a letter that he had found a job on a ship, and even gave its name. But they quickly discovered there was no such ship. Thus, only the grim supposition remained that the boy—in fact, already a man—had joined the pirates, those scoundrels who throw the Bible, rosary, and logbook overboard and finish a life of crime in dungeons or on the gallows.

For the first time Troost felt wronged, helpless, and humiliated. Anna suffered also, but quietly, in the depths of her impenetrable maternal being. On the other hand, the extensive suffering of Cornelis encompassed many different spheres of his soul: he was frightened by the unexpected blow of fortune that had been well-disposed until now but suddenly revealed its true, sneering face. He felt stripped of his good name and merits. A cruel sentence constantly returned in his thoughts: "I am now just a father of a criminal." He lost faith

in the only human immortality expressed in the hope that the name Troost—surrounded by human respect and trust—would be repeated forever in the guild of textile merchants.

What is more, the affair with Judith (according to Cornelis, there was no affair) was becoming more and more notorious. Indeed, after closing the shop he stayed longer and longer with her, ample cause for gossip. Acquaintances answered his greetings with a wink and an impish smile that probably meant, "Well well, we did not know you were such a brave boy." On the other hand, during church service his neighbors in the pew preferred to stand on the stone floor, to let him know the void surrounding him expressed severe rebuke. For the good of the firm, therefore, he decided to let the girl go. He accompanied her to the square from which carriages left in the direction of Hoorn; he hugged her in a fatherly way, pressing into her hand fourteen florins and eight stivers.

She disappeared in the crowd. He did not know whether she entered the carriage. If she went to the tavern on the other side of the street, At the Black Cock, which had the worst reputation (sailors hungry for cheap love knew it well), her fate was sealed. This thought, and especially the lustful images associated with her, haunted him for years.

He worked with his old energy, but without the enthusiasm that gives wings to all enterprises. Sometimes he refused to buy large shipments of merchandise even on advantageous terms, saying: "I leave it to the young; now I make the rounds of my estate and check walls, locks, and chains." The business, however, went no worse than before.

In the spring, Anna died.

Now he was alone. He thought for some time that he should crown the memory of himself and Anna with stone. It was to be a bas-relief built into the wall of the Nieuwe Kerk representing the couple holding each other's hands, with a quotation from the Bible underneath: "Thus I repent and do penance in dust and ashes." But the common sense of Cornelis, which never abandoned him even when he approached spheres not subject to reason (rarely, it is true), suggested that he who truly humbles himself before the Lord

does not erect marble monuments to himself. He pushed the temptation aside. “A simple plaque on the floor of the church will be enough,” he said, surprised at his own modesty.

A new idea liberated unsuspected reserves of initiative, inventiveness, and enthusiasm. He managed to convince his exceedingly economical guild brothers (for years he had been dean of the guild) that it was necessary to build an orphanage. The spirit of a young entrepreneur entered Cornelis, more, an apostle of a cause. He tried to be everywhere at once: he organized collections, banquets, and lotteries to add to the funds of the enterprise, he approved plans, supervised the progress of construction, conferred for hours with masons and carpenters about every detail. He liked to stroll in the courtyard of the future orphanage and draw with his cane against the sky the still nonexistent walls and windows, floors, moldings, and steep roof.

He spent evenings at home “in the yellow room” whose windows gave onto the garden. An armchair upholstered with red cordovan stood there in which Mr. Jong (how many years ago it was) read his Latin poets half aloud. It was the most venerable piece of furniture in the household, like a flagship commanding a flotilla of beds, tables, benches, chairs, abysmal wardrobes, and cupboards. Cornelis would take a few books from the library at random and sink into that armchair, leafing through the last number of the *Dutch Mercury*, in which there was always so much interesting news about floods, court intrigues, the exchange, miracles, and crimes. He did not read much; he listened to the hubbub of the street and murmurs in the house. A strong smell came from the garden of narcissus, wild roses, and saffron.

As he let himself be carried away by sounds and smells, he had the experience that time was no longer docile. Before, during his youth, he was its master; he knew how to stop or accelerate it like a fisherman who imposes his own rhythm on the current of a river. Now he felt like a stone thrown to the bottom, a stone covered with moss over which a mobile immensity of incomprehensible waters was rolling.

The book would slip off his knees. He fell into torpor. More and more often the servant had to wake him for supper.

Soon after his birthday, which was celebrated with pomp (he had turned sixty), he fell sick. The doctors diagnosed a jaundiced fever, recommended peace, and gave assurances that the patient would quickly return to health. Cautious Cornelis made a testament and ordered that debts be paid back ahead of time. The state of the firm was as follows: assets, 12,000 florins; liabilities easy to collect, 9,300 florins; 5,100 florins in valuable papers and shares in the East India Company.

He was getting weaker and weaker; now he no longer got up from bed. The physicians prescribed herb compresses, different potions: quinine wine, tincture of aloes, extract of gentian. They also let his blood, and in the end recommended that spider heads in walnut shells be applied to the chest of the patient; if that did not help, verses from the Bible could be substituted for the spider heads. Clearly, science was discreetly giving way to faith.

Every day around five—it was a sunny, very warm summer—an old friend of Troost would come, Abraham Anslo[2], once a preacher famous throughout Holland, today a silent old man with a sparse gray beard and permanently tearing eyes. He sat at the foot of the bed. They smiled to each other, their dialogue taking place beyond words and time. The patient had a huge need to confess his doubts, spiritual perplexities, and anxieties. He could not understand the Other World at all. The empty blue skies frightened him. Very likely it was an impious rebellion of the imagination, above all of the pagan senses. He was absolutely unable to understand how one can exist without a house, without creaking stairs and a banister, without curtains and candelabra, also without the cloth that had surrounded him throughout his life. What implacable force takes away from us the coolness of coarse silk, black wool flowing through the hands like a gentle wave, linen recalling the surface of a pond covered with ice, velvet tickling like moss, laces that seemed to whisper women's secrets?

Anslo would leave before dusk, and touch the hand of his friend with cold fingers for good-bye.

Not much time remained.

Tomorrow, the day after tomorrow a servant would enter with breakfast and give a short cry.

Then they would cover all the mirrors in the house, and turn all the pictures to the walls so the image of a girl writing a letter, of ships in open sea, of peasants dancing under a tall oak, would not stop the one who wanders toward unimaginable worlds from going on his way.

THE KING OF THE ANTS

translated by

John and Bogdana Carpenter,

with additional translations by **Alissa Valles**

I

BLACK FIGURE VASE BY EKSEKIAS[21]

To Joseph Brodsky

Where is Dionysus sailing across a sea as red as wine

what islands does he seek under the sign of grapevines

He's asleep and doesn't know—and so nor do we

where downstream the agile beechwood boat is sailing

II

THE GODS OF THE COPYBOOK HEADINGS[1]

H.E.O.[2]

To Kasia

DO WE HAVE to? asks Eurydice. Hermes smiles, he is silent. As they walk, darkness parts before them and immediately closes after them. They pass through countless gates.

—Is it necessary? asks Eurydice. Orpheus is old, I won't live with him much longer. I have forgotten the herbs I used for his throat which was sore from singing. I have forgotten what it is to get up at dawn. Or what a man wants when he touches my belly.

—Your memory will come back, Hermes says, gently and without conviction.

—You want to cheer me up, says Eurydice.

The road goes uphill, it is not a road but an obedient parting of cliffs. Flints smell like dried lightning. The small pebbles underfoot have completely forgotten the sea.

—Does he see us? Eurydice asks with concern.

With a motion of his head, Hermes denies it.

—I see his back. Always, when I was alive, I was moved by a man's back; it is helpless. But I don't feel this any longer. Tenderness—what is tenderness?

—The joy of touch, Hermes answers, a kind of lower ecstasy.

—My fingers are no longer alive, complains Eurydice. I couldn't thread a needle or remove a mote from the eye of someone I loved.

One more turn and the descent begins. Darkness, as if slanted, leaning over another deeper darkness.

—Eurydice, Hermes says in a low voice, I will reveal the secret of your fate. Orpheus will soon die in suspicious circumstances. You will be free and take as husband a healthy athlete with shoulders like the branches of an oak. He will be a young man, without imagination, wise enough not to desire unattainable things. You can't imagine how invigorating it will be after a life with a talented crybaby.

—I think, Eurydice says quickly, they would stone me to death rather than permit a second marriage. I will become a national widow, an advertisement for faithfulness and poetry. They will put me on a cliff where I am supposed to mutter inspired prophecies, or imprison me in a temple, which amounts to the same thing. Then I will die for a second time. How does one die a second time? I hope it isn't as painful and difficult as the first.

Orpheus hears all of this through the pouring darkness. For the first time he admires Eurydice's wisdom. Is it really necessary to die in order to become an adult?

A basalt landscape opens before him, as stately as a burnt forest, motionless as the eye of a volcano or the inside of thick matter. Azure of night burnt by nothingness.

I sang dawns the coronations of the sun

the journey of colors from morning to evening

but I forgot about you

eternal night

Orpheus suddenly turns toward the shadows of Eurydice and Hermes and shouts in rapture—I've found it!

The shadows disappear. Orpheus comes into the light of day. He bursts with joyful pride that he has experienced a revelation and discovered a new kind of literature, called, from now on, the poetry of reflection and darkness.

ANTAEUS

ANTAEUS WAS THE son of Poseidon and Gaea. To put it gently, not a very harmonious couple. What else could be expected from the elements of sea and earth, fighting each other fiercely? It is probable that Antaeus was a neglected, abandoned child—but how difficult it is to imagine the childhood of a giant! The savage quarrels of his parents certainly had a negative influence that shaped his character.

All sources agree that Antaeus grew up to be a crude, violent man, with more than human strength. His intellectual resources were modest, but his body was exuberant. Although he never went to any school, he drew a logically correct conclusion from this disproportion: he became a sportsman.

It is difficult to place Antaeus on the map of the world. In the old myths his home was Libya, it was there that he met Heracles. But later, with Greek colonization of the northern shore of Africa, this fairy-tale-like figure was pushed farther west, all the way to Mauritania where Punic merchants drove the Greeks away. Colonizers do not create myths, but instead labor tirelessly on their geography. They simply locate monsters on terrain occupied by their competitors. This procedure has survived commendably to our own times.

We know little about Antaeus himself, except that he was nourished with the meat of lions he killed with his bare hands. He scorned modern civilization—the cudgel, the spear, the trap dug in the ground. His favorite occupation was challenging wanderers he met to a wrestling match. The adversary was forced to fight, and these struggles inevitably ended with his death.

Such a way of life cannot awaken our sympathy or our approval. But a poet—this is unusual—hurried to Antaeus's rescue. The eminent poet Pindar defended him from the accusation he was simply an ordinary assassin, a repulsive murderer. In one of his *Isthmian Odes*, Pindar[1] tried to discover a meaning in the criminal activity of Antaeus, or at least to make it comprehensible.

The region where Antaeus lived was poor in stones, and only the wind sometimes erected deceptive monuments of sand. Imaginary cities of marble sometimes appeared on the dry horizon. Pindar wrote that Antaeus dreamed of erecting a temple to honor his father. He humanized Antaeus, and endowed him with the praiseworthy virtue of filial love. The only solid materials at his disposal were the terrestrial remnants of his unfortunate adversaries; there was nothing to do but take advantage of this building material. The idea—rather macabre in itself—is not, after all, so far removed from baroque aesthetics.

So Antaeus collected the bones of those he killed just as a good builder lovingly collects stones, bricks, and wood. He took care to preserve them safely from the sun, the omnivorous sand, and humidity.

He changed the plan of his edifice many times. He wanted the mausoleum honoring his parents to have the ideal proportions of the human body.

The apses were made of ribs, he also used ribs for the temple's vault. Beady wrist bones hung down, creating an illusion of lamps and chandeliers.

The columns were made from the bones of spines. He tied several together to give necessary strength to the building.

Each year, during the season of winds and rains, the temple would collapse. All the builder's labors recalled an abandoned camp of hyenas. Bones lay in disorder on the sand. It was as if the gods sneered at those who try to become higher, destroying them.

And every year Antaeus began anew with the same stubbornness, piety, and hopeless love.

Seen from a distance, and illuminated from above, Antaeus resembled a boulder slowly moving through the wilderness. His gait was like the mannered way actors move in Westerns, but in the case of the giant it was a hard necessity, not a mannerism. He drew all his energy and strength from the earth —from physical contact with rock, with clay, even with dust.

If he were not a child of the gods—no one dared question this—one would think that nature treated him unfairly, refusing him a definite spot in the chain of being in a moment of distraction. Who knows whether the form of a tree, a cedar for example, would not be the most appropriate shape for his existence. But Antaeus was an above-ground creature; he was deprived of roots, and marked by fear of the abyss of air surrounding him on all sides. The birds and stars suspended above filled him with revulsion. Each jump or leap made his head turn, and he would feel faint.

Antaeus did not have a home or permanent stopping place. Nights in the desert fall fast: the gray lightning of dusk, and then—right away—darkness. When the sun was about to set, Antaeus would build a shelter: a deep underground corridor so narrow there was only room for his supine body. He would squeeze into this murky, humid refuge like a huge worm, falling into blissful, nourishing sleep.

One can explain these nightly practices of Antaeus symbolically, as a nostalgic search for origins or a return to the mother's womb. But why multiply hidden meanings when everything can be explained in a simple way: by cycles of vegetation.

Everyone who has been in the dessert has noticed clumps of twigs and leaves that appear completely dead, rolled by the wind. At first glance they seem like the trash of creation, crumbs from Mother Nature's table. But as soon as the first rains come, a sudden metamorphosis takes place. What seemed to be forever thrust away from life sends down roots, blooms, intoxicates with fragrance, bears fruit—in a word, lives wonderfully in a powerful, lavish way.

There are reasons to believe that the encounter between Antaeus and Heracles was accidental. This is why it was not

engraved on the bronze tablet that describes the main labors of Heracles. It was not planned on the hero's calendar—well, it was one of his guest performances.

All sources agree about the results of the duel, but the way it took place has been reported differently. Diodorus Siculus[2] describes it as a wrestling match combined with a wager that required the loser to forfeit his life. (But he does not say if it was by his own hand or that of the victor.) This is a flat, vulgar version, bringing to mind the rules of gladiators' fights or—even worse—Russian roulette. Other accounts, not very edifying either, say that Heracles blocked the entrance to the underground refuge with his own body, what might be called "starving out the city."

Antaeus was humanized not only by Pindar but by Plato himself, who endowed him with professional intelligence and the invention of certain wrestling grips. Thus poetry, time, and philosophy all labored to endow the fight with the features of a real *agon* in which adversaries had statistically equal chances.

In reality it was an open, manly duel: *mano al mano*, and murderous.

Heracles understood right away that he was engaged in a fight without precedent. Battles and wrestling matches are based on the attempt to deprive the enemy of an upright position—to reduce him to a supine object. But each time Antaeus was thrown on the ground he sprang up more and more vigorously, ready and raucous, aggressive.

The hero had to abandon normal tactics. He had to overcome the concept, deeply rooted in us all, of what we call high and low, the elevation of the victor and the throwing of the defeated down into the dust. For every time Antaeus was lifted up, it meant death for him.

Literary accounts of the encounter are few and this is why it is difficult to recreate the course of events. By their nature, mosaics, sculptures and paintings record a moment, not a sequence of events. I believe that the content of the duel—its raw essence—was best represented by the Renaissance painter Antonio Pollaiuolo[3]. His painting is small, almost a miniature

that can be covered by the hand, but has such an amount of pent-up energy that its power of expression surpasses yards of garrulous frescoes.

Pollaiuolo did not succumb to the temptation of presenting Antaeus as a giant. The rules of humanism forbade such expressionistic whims, so both adversaries have human proportions. They also lack classical beauty; instead they are a well-matched pair of similar broad-shouldered, long-haired savages. This was an accurate intuition, for in reality the duel was brutal, its ending naturalistic, ordinary, without a trace of noble simplicity or quiet greatness.

The hands of Heracles tighten around the hips of his adversary like iron clasps. Similar to a peasant with legs apart, struggling with a sack and trying to lift it over his back, he tears him from the ground and raises him to the level of his shoulders.

Antaeus no longer defends himself. He presses his clenched fists against the elbows of Heracles—he throws his head back, drawing his legs up. His helpless defense recalls a big fish thrashing in a net, flinging his entire body backward and flinging it forward, until the pendulum becomes completely still.

His mouth is wide open, but he does not shout. Asthmatics, breathing in crumbs of air with difficulty, do not waste strength on screams and curses. In a moment, it will be the end.

Heracles will carefully wait for the moment when his adversary's arms fall along the body and his legs dangle limply like the legs of a hanged man. Then he will listen attentively to Antaeus's silent heart. With relief he will throw the burden to the ground. For a moment he will stand above him. Perhaps he will think with a bit of melancholy that Greek mythology does not know the word resurrection.

Yet Antaeus keeps returning. He strives after our memory. No longer savage and elementary but devoid of violence, almost nostalgic.

In upper Egypt Antaeus was given the posthumous title of a god. A city was baptized in his name. Who would have thought that from a chthonic[4] monster, he would be completely transformed into an apostle of civilization and the middle class?

A mound was discovered near the Mauritanian city of Tingris[5], and it was generally believed that the terrestrial remains of the giant lay underneath. It was a tomb but also a place of witchcraft. It was enough to dig up some dirt from the topmost layer, and it would produce atmospheric precipitation. An amazing career indeed—from a brigand to a conjuror of rain.

It is possible to risk the assertion that the meaning of the myth of Antaeus is attachment. It is a feeling rather than an ideology, and surely this is why it is impossible to communicate it to others. It is extremely difficult to convince someone that it is worthwhile to love a meager plot of land as small as a donkey's shadow, as the shadow of a poplar, a broken house, or a destroyed city on a dried-up river. In a word, the place where we were born, and which was unable to feed or protect us.

For the nomads of civilization and the tenants of jet planes, Antaeus will remain forever the symbol of a primitive barbarian. They succumb to the illusion that the breaking of ties and a sickly mobility are necessary conditions of progress. But they forget that chasing after the sun and global utopias must end in catastrophe. In the last analysis everything is reduced to the choice, or the assignment by others, of a place in the cemetery.

All those strange refugees who take on the shapes of incomprehensible mutants or even monsters in the pitiless eyes of the natives will find gracious shelter in the shadow of the outspread arms of Antaeus.

They have saved only two minute treasures—their own speech, and names that sound in foreign ears like the bells of a clown. Their land was snatched from them as well as the water in which they saw the faces of their god and of the invader.

Now they are silently dying in the thin air of freedom that belongs to others.

THE INFERNAL DOG

To Julia Hartwig and Arthur Międzyrzecki

SURVIVING RECORDS ABOUT the anatomy of Cerberus, and his physiological as well as psychological functions, are numerous but show alarming divergences. The ambition of the present study is to throw a new shaft of light on a muddled problem.

According to the Archpoet[1] Homer, Cerberus was simply a dog. Dante calls him a worm. Hesiod mentions Cerberus twice[2] in the *Theogony*, but is unable to decide if he has one head or fifty. Pindar doubles this number, while Horace endows Cerberus with a mane of snakes. The tragedians are more restrained, content with three heads. Sculptors and painters represent Cerberus with three heads at most. Here an observation comes to mind—language is inclined to hyperbole and exaggeration if not lying, while a statement in marble or paint imposes a matter-of-fact simplicity.

Because of the dim illumination at the place of action, the outcome of the struggle between Heracles and Cerberus—guardian of the kingdom of the dead—was unclear. It was the twelfth, the last and most difficult, labor of the hero. Hence the sacred semi-obscurity that befits other worlds.

What kind of a fight was it? It is impossible to form a clear opinion based on the literary excavations; different, contradictory versions vacillate between a bloody wrestling match and something like a Sunday hunt for booty. Some say it was Kore[3] who gave Cerberus to Heracles as a gift, just as parents might give a bicycle to a boy for good behavior.

Others claim that Hades, ruler of the underworld, was mortally bored and arranged something like a tournament. But the animal and the man wrestled with each other—long, and painfully.

A question remains: what was the character of Cerberus? Demonized beyond measure, he played the decorative role in Hades of a doorman in front of a hotel. The number of the dead who wanted to return to earth was insignificant. Cerberus was not overworked. He was like a sign, BEWARE OF THE DOG and NO EXIT. What kind of a demon was it that could be bribed with a honeycake? His threatening function was to wag his tail.

Whatever happened, neither adversary was wounded. Hence the conclusion that it wasn't a battle in the strict sense of the word but a strategic maneuver, circling the adversary and forcing him into unconditional capitulation. Most likely Heracles used the classical method of strangling. But this is a detail. It is enough that the breathless hero surfaced—together with his prize—above the ground.

It happened…exactly where? Again sources vacillate, mentioning a number of points on the world's map. But the problem is academic. We know from experience that in every mature civilization, descents to hell are numerous. Even more numerous than beer stands or mailboxes.

In hell Cerberus barked with a powerful voice. On a mute amphora in the Louvre, the painter Andikos[4] has seized the significance of the duel between Heracles and Cerberus: Heracles assumes the position of a runner at the start, the body thrust forward, right hand moving in the direction of the beast's forehead, a huge chain in his left hand. Cerberus is two-headed. One of the heads is watchful and aggressive, but the other bends to the ground as if awaiting the man's touch. Such is the beginning of the tragedy called taming.

Cerberus is the victim of the assault. How does he feel? The initial light shock has already passed and now another shock begins, so strong, so overpowering that it threatens the dog's heart. He is like a deepwater fish dragged onto the sand.

Sounds, shapes, odors fall on him like an avalanche. The world appears in furiously intense colors like Fauvist paintings: the grass flaming red, trees cinnabar, limestone rocks violet and black, the sky green. Only Heracles has a gentle hue, his figure surrounded by a delicate, pulsating contour.

Harder to bear is the deluge of five hundred thousand odors.

The fiery sun over the dried-up earth.

Under an oak tree, on a high hill, a dog and a man are lying next to each other.

They do not take their eyes off each other. They are distrustful rather than hostile.

Heracles smells of blood, leather, and slaughter; Cerberus smells of decomposing proteins. They belong to two irreconcilable worlds.

Suddenly it occurs to Heracles that if Cerberus wants to leave him, he cannot prevent it. He decides to speak. In such cases the sound of the word has a captivating force.

Heracles: Listen to me, beast. You are my prisoner. If you try to escape, I will smash your head—heads, he corrects himself—according to international law.

Cerberus gives a prolonged growl.

It is night now. There is a big moon.

Cerberus rises on his hind legs. Heracles reaches for his bloodstained club.

At this moment a song is heard. There is little sense in describing music—only those who have listened to the voice of a wolf on a snowy plain during winter nights can conceive of the cantata of Cerberus. For those who have not experienced this wonder, we give a rough transcription of the original, as inept as a newspaper reproduction compared to an original Rembrandt. The following paraphrase is from Alexander Schmook, *Der Wolf—sein Wesen und seine Stimme*, Tübingen, 1848:

Hurr hau-u-uh

hau hau

U-i-jaur-huuu

Ho hau

Hurrrrr ho hauuuh

Jau jau ho hurrr hau-uh

Resounding silence, then repetitions at equal intervals of time.

Heracles is carried away by Cerberus's voice as if on a powerful ocean wave. As he listens he wants to howl with him. But he knows he would discredit himself, for he is unable to draw such pride and despair from his throat. In vain would he try to describe with his voice the chains of land, abysmal spaces, the innumerable springs of blood hidden in bodies of animals, secrets of water and thirst, the hiding places of light and immense blackness.

The road leading to King Eurystheus, who was to free Heracles from his curse, was long. Cerberus began to be attached to Heracles. His character of a monster underwent a metamorphosis—he became like a dog.

People of a sentimental disposition might discover something moving in this. But the hero had a temperament devoid of feeling yet impulsive at the same time. He noticed that whenever he raised his head, Cerberus did the same, and a barely restrained fury grew in him. The dog became the mirror of his master, a distorted mirror, we should add, because of the difference of postures.

But the worst was yet to come. Cerberus began to speak. Awkwardly at the beginning, with much saliva, he would pronounce words like "myum" or "beddy," but his vocabulary became richer from day to day, his syntax more complicated.

Especially at night, Heracles forgot he was wandering with a dog. He kept his feelings in check, remembering that his role

was to guard a captive.

Heracles: I don't like you. I don't like you at all.

Cerberus: Not everyone can be Heracles.

Heracles: If you at least pretended to be a normal dog. I suppose you wouldn't be very popular with the females.

At this point Heracles stopped talking—he had touched on a delicate subject. On the road they had passed female dogs, but Cerberus paid no attention to them.

Cerberus: If you had lived like me among decaying bodies, you would lose appetite for everything.

Heracles: Why do you eat grass and smell flowers, but you don't hunt rabbits? It makes no sense. Maybe you could howl. Do you remember our first night under an oak tree? Lord how time is flying; you howled beautifully.

Cerberus: How could I howl now? What did you tame me for?

Heracles: Mongrel, every idiot knows how to speak. You must howl, do you understand?

Cerberus: I won't howl.

Heracles: Well then, sleep.

Heracles thought feverishly: this absurd relationship has to be broken. When King Eurystheus sees Cerberus, he will notice right away he is not a threatening figure but comical. He will find one more labor for me, while people will see for themselves that life after death has completely…gone to hell. What, then, will become of the fashion of death, of its discrete presence so full of insinuations?

Dawn. Heracles and Cerberus wake simultaneously, as if their sleep and waking are tied by a common thread.

Heracles: Listen, I haven't made any sacrifices for a long time, and it is because of you.

Cerberus: Why because of me?

Heracles: I have to guard you.

Cerberus: It’s nice of you.

Heracles: Not at all. I am neglecting my religious duties. Do you see that temple in the distance?

Cerberus: I don’t see very well; so many years in the darkness….

Heracles: Don’t feel sorry for yourself. The temple is far away, I will reach it by sunset. Tomorrow at dawn I will make a sacrifice, and I will return at midnight, maybe later. Stay here and keep watch; don’t budge from the spot. I don’t want to have to search for you, is it clear?

Cerberus: I will keep watch.

Heracles ran blindly ahead. Sometimes he stopped and looked, listening, peering anxiously behind. He weaved as he ran, changing directions, walking against the wind, wading through marshes and streams to lose his tracks. He wanted to obliterate that stubborn smell of a master and his dog that clings to each blade of grass, each sand grain, and is immediately recognized by every four-legged creature as a unique, peculiar, divine odor.

Well, one can flee not only from an enemy but also from a burden of attachment. Everyone does it, or knows the temptation very well.

At dusk Heracles made a sleeping place in the branches of an old elm. When he fell asleep he was on a tower, beyond the sphere of apprehension.

In the morning, two pairs of eyes were watching every movement of the awakened man.

They continued their journey. But can one call a journey an unrelenting chase to a destination at the limits of a human’s and a dog’s heart?

They stopped only briefly for the night or meals. Heracles was bored and decided to give Cerberus some lessons on natural history, taking the latest scientific discoveries into account.

A partisan of the descriptive method, he thrust his hand into grass as if into green water.

—You see, this is *Trifolium pratense*, popularly known as clover. It grows in meadows; its perennial root is spindle-shaped and bifurcating. Papyli grow on delicate, hairy offshoots. They contain bacteria that assimilate azote (like all plants in the Papilionaecae family). Its flowers are light red or dark scarlet. They have round heads, surrounded at the base by leaves.

He rummaged in the grass again and pulled out an oval, red object.

—Here is *Dorcus paralellopipedus*. It is voracious. It lives in deciduous forests. The larvae develop in rotten oaks and beeches. Are you following me?

Tomorrow we will speak about photosynthesis and the early work by Kant, *Allgemeine Naturgeschichte und Theorie des Himmels*. Now go to sleep, blockhead.

They reached Mycenae the next evening. The city was deserted. It was close to autumn and a cold, stubborn drizzle was drifting down. They walked through empty streets, along walls the color of liver; Heracles walked in front, with difficulty assuming the look of a victor. Behind him Cerberus, content with himself, idiotically happy, tried to walk in step like an obedient recruit.

Not a trace of a triumphal entrance. Yet it was an unusually dramatic event that happened only once in the world's history —it deserved a wreath, applauding crowds, trumpets and pealing bells.

From beginning to end a worm had been gnawing at this beautiful flower of victory, and the severest fate—the fate of banality—hovered over the hero. It stripped away all glory and flattened everything, pushing a beautiful deed low, very low, into the realm of the anecdote.

When he was fighting his way through rain and mud with his freakish monster, it might have been a consolation for

Heracles to know that King Eurystheus was watching him from his palace window with growing alarm.

Cerberus went berserk. In all his life he had never seen so many people smelling of wine and garlic; he terrorized the vegetable markets, devouring countless quantities of cauliflowers, artichokes, and cucumbers, and rampaged among market stands smelling of celery, frightening the vendors. Children adored him and rode on his back.

King Eurystheus did not want to see either Heracles or Cerberus. He asked them to leave the city.

—Mongrel, Heracles said, I am bored by this constant, hungry wandering from town to town. We should start a circus. You will walk on your hind legs in front of the gaping spectators, I will threaten you and crack my whip. Do you know how to walk on your hind legs?

—Of course, said Cerberus, a little bit hurt. He liked the idea.

One day Heracles brought a gray hemp sack from a nearby town. He casually mentioned to Cerberus that he would sleep on it because his bones ached from sleeping on the bare ground. Cerberus accepted this unquestioningly. The thought didn’t dawn in either of his two heads that the tragic finale of the whole story was approaching.

The nagging question will remain unanswered forever, how could Heracles push this damp, dirty sack deep into the dark opening full of helpless screams and the howling of disappointed love.

TRIPTOLEMOS

HERE IS A myth for those weary of the world's cruelty (the thoughtless cruelty of humans and the calculated cruelty of gods), a myth flat as a plain, a soothing myth, which is why narrators thirsty for blood and intrigue tend to avoid it.

Triptolemos was the son of Keleos, king of Eleusis, at whose court Demeter stayed.

He was a modest local hero, but his significance grew considerably beyond the framework of any Gotha almanac[1].

Thankful for the help the house of Triptolemos had offered in her search for Persephone, Demeter initiated the family's young son into the ritual of sowing.

And Triptolemos went into the world and spread the gospel of sowing, the gospel of harvest, the gospel of wheat, the gospel of rye, the gospel of oats. And he spread the gospel of corn, carried through the world on a chariot drawn by two snakes.

Indeed, the sight of the gatherer peoples aroused pity mingled with disgust. Let us imagine a great herd of scruffily dressed vagabonds of both sexes, children, adults and elderly people, roaming the fringes of prehistoric forests, meadows and groves, bending over and tearing out tufts of grass, picking up something sticky from the ground, putting it hastily into their greedily opened oral cavities and then chewing with an expression of extreme discouragement. The gatherers' favorite grazing spots were nature's garbage dumps, the ragged edges of ravines, swamps, mysterious crevices in the earth swarming with frogs, scorpions and spiders.

That's what the gatherers were like.

If anybody wished to paint a portrait of one, he would have to put in the right hand a bunch of uprooted plants and have the left arm against the body, wrist bent in a gesture of resignation.

It is precisely to those hands, arms, and shoulders that Triptolemos appealed; he roused them to fight, instilled the habit of purposeful movements. He grafted a sowing motion onto slavishly bent backs—a narcotic motion, shoulders moving like a pendulum as at the time of a great battle.

Triptolemos was a historical necessity at that time. Every resignation menaced the gatherers with a process of regression, a retreat down the ladder of species, to a family of anthropoid scum.

Only at one moment did the gatherers rise to a higher level. Toward evening they would sit at the entrances to their lowly dwellings, squatting together and observing the sunset. Ecstasy took hold of them and they wet themselves. At those times they were defenseless. Belonging by nature to the unbeautiful beings, they sought to soar into the spheres of beauty; that is why an aesthetics desperately seeking a raison d'être should hold them in grateful memory.

The hunting class looked quite different.

The hunters devoted their lives to hunting. Elegantly clad in the bright uniforms of every colonial army, they brought back their trophies to manor houses laid out on wood-fringed meadows, hung skins and horns on the walls of their spacious rooms like ex-votos, which was less a sign of their piety as of their splendid wealth. They themselves:

—fell by turns into periods of enthusiasm and melancholy, and also succumbed to the dangerous habit of noting down their thoughts.

—were marked by a tendency now to asceticism, now to a life of unbridled excess and a descent into extremes of moroseness and despair.

—were completely indifferent to the fate of the gatherers, with the exception of one day in the year when a ritual

massacre of their cousins took place.

As the higher primates adapted, front teeth gradually lost their dominance to molars as a consequence of the easy access to food.

Triptolemos set out on his apostolic travels presciently equipped with an ample scholarly library and also with everything we call the basics of a good workshop: charts, tables, maps, laboratories.

The gatherer elite came to Triptolemos's lectures and lab sessions first with hesitation, later in droves. And the wheat apostle's heart swelled. He knew the adoption of agrarian culture would refine their customs.

But we can't confine ourselves to the figure given to us by myth: an inspired agronomer traveling through the world teaching people the useful art of dropping seeds in furrows of earth in order to reap the hundredfold fruits, marking out his own 'way of life' whose pillars rested on industry and frugality.

One assumes, though we have no proof of it, that Triptolemos was carrying out the will of the old goddess Demeter to the letter, but for him teaching became a process of inward perfection. He became pedantic in his actions and teachings, to which was added a certain mania, particular to pedagogical bodies. Ideological tendencies and unfounded expectations turned into a faith that they would make of man a more perfect creature—and that there was pride in belonging to the order of peasants, which was supposed to be significantly above any other calling or profession, any orientation of hands and minds on which future allegiances would be founded.

Triptolemos's invariably good opinion of himself was based on a belief that he represented a progressive force in humankind, one that was striding ahead. That's why the gods who had guarded the mystery of fire so jealously, seeing what was going on, adopted a policy of 'observe without reacting'. They believed that people would be able to invent and apply a sufficiently harsh punishment themselves. It lay in the very

word ‘harvest feast’. The loud celebrations, rites of spring and harvest ended with joyful human sacrifice. The good Triptolemos knew nothing of this. It was a side effect of his worthy mission.

Triptolemos was consumed by the idea of universalizing agriculture. However, he lacked imagination, so his theoretical lectures on agriculture, on geology, the ones that explained the circulation of nitrogen in the natural world, were illustrated by ideological tables and charts. Triptolemos said that after their sweaty labor peasants could look forward to long months of leisure time, which they could devote to literature, classical and popular music, with politics reserved for the less discriminating among them: for the snail-eaters this was a vision of paradise, a perfect abstraction.

How could the peace-loving Triptolemos, utter child that he was, imagine that the peasants would develop a taste for warfare and set out to conquer, get caught up in all sorts of Iliads and Egypts, become the subject and object of history? While those on horseback, the had-been aristocracy of humankind, experienced their own deep downfall, and became in turn the peasantry’s favorite prey, mercilessly drawn and quartered, taken in slavery, to the point where their origins were completely erased.

The coming of Triptolemos was preceded by the fame of his miraculous achievements. His departure was quiet, without goodbyes or ceremonies of thanksgiving. Apostles should never look back. A benefactor should never look over his shoulder. He left a song:

Triptolemos Triptolemos

Triptolemos Triptolemos (repeat)

Today it is still played by rock groups across the world. He himself does not ask for applause. His gentle face fades into the mist, a face marred slightly by the pendulous lower lip of a cooperative fanatic, a missionary of cereals, an evangelist of starch.

THE KING OF THE ANTS[1]

AJAX WAS THE son of Zeus and Aegina, who was a river god's daughter. He was born on a deserted island. As he grew in years, he had the vague conviction that somehow he was sole ruler of this empty piece of earth in the immensity of waters: both ruler and exile at the same time. Like most foundlings, he had no idea who his father was. But he preserved a hazy memory of his mother, and he baptized the island with her name.

In the beginning, then, there was a name, a wasteland, and a king.

Ajax's only occupation was solemn idleness. This is the privilege of rulers, in the final analysis, even their duty—the manifestation of a frozen existence, a vigilant presence either benevolent or menacing. But for this one needs someone else's eyes or mirrors, because in emptiness each hieratic fold, each gesture, each lordly look turns into nothing. He was not endowed with the abilities of a Robinson Crusoe (who with such enthusiasm and praiseworthy results remade the entire practical manual of civilization), so Ajax invented an occupation and called it to himself "the royal inspection of the estate."

For entire days he wandered across the island in burned grass, rare trees, bushes, and timidly gurgling springs, their waters sinking in stone and disappearing in sand as if it never occurred to them they could at least be the beginning of a meager stream. Vegetation was sparse, there were almost no animals except a few families of frightened hares. On the other hand, there was an abundance of insects: whole swarms of crickets, beetles, and ants, the rustling of wing cases and the

noise of their crawling forming an undergrowth of what we call the symphony of creation.

On clear nights Ajax set out toward a small bay and until dawn stared at the sensational Nereids dancing in somewhat decadent moonlight, at the herds of dolphins and seals coming to shore, all swinging as if they still carried the slippery sphere of the ocean on their backs. He envied them, he even envied the schools of fish because his longing for a community was inconsolable.

At dawn he returned, even more lonely, to his palace—a violet shadow under an oak—and prayed for the father of the gods to send people to him. He fervently swore he would be understanding and good to them.

Zeus took pity on his abandoned son. In a dream Ajax saw how ants fell like red dew from the leaves and branches of the oak under which he slept, and as they touched the earth they were transformed into human shapes. When he woke the island was teeming with them. Voices drifted in the air, comings and goings, a marvelous confusion.

So instead of just a single pair salvaged from Noah's ark, a sizable chunk of humanity was bestowed on Ajax as a gift. There were hard-to-define creatures as well, of both genders, like algae crushed by sterility or the absurdity of life: long-haired youths who stared vacantly into the distance instead of doing anything positive, signifying they were studying the philosophy of the Far East; grown men and women with gentle and expressionless faces, unclassical noses, thick limbs; finally old women suffering from rheumatism who dropped everything from their hands; and old men, some garrulous, some gloomy, for whom the only consolation before death was that the world had gone insane forever. In a word Ajax had humanity just as it should be: incorrigible in an exemplary way, marvelously ordinary.

The pious king called the new inhabitants of the island Myrmidons[3]—the people of ants. In this way he wanted to glorify the goodness of the god and his miraculous intervention. How could he know that the name contained a destiny?

The fundamental duty of a good ruler is to learn the personality of his subjects: their merits and defects, the particular shape of their way of thinking and their yearnings. So Ajax assiduously observed the Myrmidons' customs. He tried to reach into the hidden nooks and crannies of their collective consciousness with all his sympathy, but sometimes also with carefully concealed anxiety and surprise.

The Myrmidons possessed an instinctive ability for self-organization rarely encountered in other peoples. They embarked on activities spontaneously, voluntarily, like children beginning a game. The division of labor presented no difficulties, everything was carried out without supervisors, overseers, prompters, the least trace of administration or hierarchy. They simply worked harmoniously from dawn till night, with a certain Protestant exaggeration, inspired, not counting on admiration or praise.

Historians of civilization, ethnologists, and structuralists carefully avoid the subject of the Myrmidons, because they do not fit their simple tripartite schemes. In the case of this peculiar people, banished from scientific textbooks, doctoral dissertations and international symposia, it was uncertain what was sacred and what profane, what was the top and the bottom, good and evil, or how the thesis—always fiercely fighting the antithesis—could be crowned with a salutary synthesis in the end.

It is true the Myrmidons were not distinguished by inquisitiveness, or excess of imagination. Their religion, surprisingly monotheistic, was limited to the old Pelasgian cult of the Mother Goat. In the domain of morality they stood in the middle, between the exuberance of virtues and the quagmire of vice. The time-honored custom of settling accounts with one's neighbor—or brother—by methodically hitting his skull with a rock was alien to them, also theft, false testimony, and calumny. Adultery was committed only by persons suffering from temporary amnesia.

The Myrmidons firmly rejected all styles of architecture. They built their settlements underground. These consisted of an intricate system of corridors, dark squares, and chambers.

The advantages were that a fire department was superfluous, and the natural environment was preserved. Above all they loudly praised the attractions of the underground climate, its pleasant coolness, independence from the capriciousness of weather, and invigorating sleep under the power of roots—sleep without starry prophecies or nightmares, tightly filled with loam, clay, and sand. They were psychologically well balanced. During their long history it is difficult to meet even a single person touched, for instance, by religious mania.

Science is mute about the Myrmidons' methods of work, but these are worthy of attention, different from known models and completely their own. The Myrmidons put their entire trust in handicrafts, in the literal sense; they rejected the comfort of tools, the benefit of the wheel, the pulley and simple lever.

Armed simply with sharpened poles and sticks, they cultivated their poor fields and vegetable gardens as the pitiless sun destroyed the fruits of their labor. They built roads and canals that were constantly buried by sand, they spent laborious months on eternal repairs of underground settlements that collapsed over their heads. The installation of a tiny footbridge (for a beaver with average education, it would be like eating breakfast) was a gigantic enterprise for the Myrmidons that passed from one generation to another.

However, they never lost enthusiasm, energy, and a sense of well-being. Progress—that treacherous force that pushes humanity toward risky extravaganzas—suffered. On the other hand, full employment provided a sense of security.

They always worked together, and it always seemed there were too many of them. They struggled with resistant matter. Although the results were not imposing, one could not take one's eyes away from those strained muscles, bent backs, and living hands struggling with the soulless mass. The acoustic effects accompanying these efforts were worthy of the highest admiration. Loud youthful calls, songlike mutual encouragement, rhythmic sounds coming from the depths of the lungs, cries of triumph and defeat—all these composed a cantata of rare beauty. Toothless old men always gathered next

to those who were working, increasing a confusion already considerable as they commented in a lively way on the exploits of the working teams, giving loud advice and stern reprimands.

Such were the Myrmidons.

The fate of Ajax was worthy of envy. He was loved by the gods and by his subjects[2]. It would seem that the idylls imagined by the dreamer Plato and the dreamer Vladimir Ilych were realized in perfect form. In addition they were based not on theory or conviction—which, after all, are changeable—but on the stable foundation of genetics.

New, almost revolutionary ideas sprouted in the king's head. He wanted to give his people autonomy, then slowly to transfer different spheres of power to them, limiting his own functions to representation, to preaching occasional sermons and conjuring rain. Here he met with the Myrmidons' resistance, passive and decided. They pleaded that they had enough of their own domestic occupations. Nor did they have enthusiasm for the titles (inexpensive things, and generally desired) that he wanted to bestow on certain citizens. These were supposed to lead to the formation of a generic aristocracy, and, in turn, to fruitful social tension. The king continued to reside under the oak tree, so the title of Court Chamberlain meant as much as Chamberlain of a shadow.

Because of the functions he performed and also because of his temperament, Ajax was a conservative but an enlightened conservative. He realized that an undisturbed harmony between ruler and subjects contradicts the laws of nature, therefore one had to go out and meet halfway those changes that are inevitable, even lure them out of the dark nooks of fate in order to tame them more easily later on.

He initiated cautious reforms, starting neither with the base nor with the superstructure (according to the genial distinction of the scholar Jotvues[4]), but with linguistic innovations.

On a hot July day, a ceremonial meeting of all the inhabitants took place. The king declared that from now to eternity, Aegina would be called Myrmidonia in honor of its

brave citizens. In this way he wanted to waken a dormant sense of national pride and uniqueness: to liberate man's incomprehensible tendency to elevate himself above others for rather insignificant reasons—place of birth, skin pigmentation, the shape of the nose. He also decided that the main road—a path, strictly speaking—running in the middle of the island would bear the name Avenue of Victory.

The Myrmidons received these ordinances calmly, shaking their heads. But everything remained as it was, the old way. In a quarrel about universals, the meek inhabitants, without realizing it, took the position of those who claim that general concepts are inherent in things and do not float like menacing clouds over objects. Such was their simplicity.

The education of society, like all education, implies a gradation, passing from easier degrees to the more difficult. After his first defeat, Ajax initiated the next stage of national education. In order to prepare his stubborn provincials to meet other peoples, he announced that an International Trade Fair would soon take place on the island.

A number of merchants, mostly from Crete, came to Aegina. The Myrmidons exhibited the best they had to offer: sticks for farming, shoes made of bark, homespun jackets, clay pots without decoration, hemp string with knots that passed for jewelry. The guests, however, glittered with the dazzling wealth of their exhibits: their proverbial beads and percales, new automatic models of plows, objects for killing animals and people, pendants, earrings, feather diadems, and merchandise the purpose of which the inhabitants of Aegina could not even guess.

All this was looked at without great interest; the consumer's instinct didn't even budge. A scandal was caused by their total lack of understanding for articles that everywhere else enjoyed great popularity: namely pitchers, amphoras, and mixing bowls on which the best painters of the period depicted gods, animals, and people in intimate situations, representing them with minute, detailed realism.

Soon after the merchants' visit that ended in a fiasco, rich deposits of silver were accidentally discovered on the island.

Ajax immediately understood that this was a gift from the gods: it might lift Aegina out of its backwardness, permit a leap from a primitive barter economy to the exchange of money, and awaken the desire to possess. Finally, it could divide the monotonously homogeneous inhabitants into the fat and the lean, the rich and the poor. But the incorrigible Myrmidons broke the precious metal against rocks, changing it into powder which they scattered on the corridors of their underground dwellings.

The king was not discouraged by setbacks. When someone firmly sets his mind to make humanity happy, it is difficult, unfortunately, to dissuade him. Ajax knew that happiness implies movement, striving, climbing upward. But he did not know that progress, to use this ominous word, was only an image, neither better nor worse than other figments of the imagination. On the other hand the Myrmidons, who were deprived of imagination and never expressed their thoughts (their convictions were stronger because of it), knew as a certainty that life is a circle bound by death. It is closed rather than open, individual rather than general, contained exactly within the limits of every separate body: of men, of insects, of trees. This is why naked feet walking in a circle are more natural than a march following in the steps of a dreadful giant who triumphantly strides toward goals hidden behind the horizon, along a straight line that comes from nothing and leads to a better, radiant nothing.

After his unsuccessful experiments in base and language, Ajax decided to attack the problem of the embarrassing apathy of his subjects from the direction of superstructure. To be sure, the intellectual standard of an average Myrmidon left much to be desired. No one was attracted by learning, or even theology. They took the world as it was (naive realism) and considered questioning it a waste of time.

Ajax started to bring to the island the most eminent philosophers from the continent. They were to speak about everything that came into their heads, exactly like the present practice in universities of the Western hemisphere. The undertaking was planned on a huge scale and was to last for

years; the participation of citizens was obligatory and included women, children, even infants.

This time the ruler's initiative met with a response that surpassed all expectations, filling the royal heart with boundless joy. The Myrmidons went to the lectures in crowds, even without special incentives. They sat in a large semicircle around the speaker, closing their eyes, some opening their mouths, while others rested their heads on their hands, filled with metaphysical revery. Silence reigned, interrupted only by an occasional deep sigh.

Until one day it exploded. When a speaker finished his lecture with a fundamental statement expressing the ontological principle of identity[5]—"it is necessary to say and to think that what is exists, because existence is, and nonexistence is not"—a burst of laughter as powerful as thunder could be heard.

It was not at all a scoffing laughter but an explosion of spontaneous, unrestrained joy. The Myrmidons rolled on the ground, bellowed, chuckled, those who lost their breath made whining squeaks and yelps like a dog. They beat their heads with their hands, and tears of pure happiness flowed from their eyes.

After this incident, philosophers stopped visiting Aegina. What is more, the name Myrmidons became—how unjustly—synonymous with spiritual coarseness. Yet no one but they made the momentous discovery that every intellectual labor is a peculiar degeneration, and its results contain a powerful dose of the comic. Invented problems, intellectual constructions, categories and concepts—if one looks at them closely—are irresistibly funny. Of all the wisdom bestowed on the Myrmidons, they accepted in their colloquial language only the word *apeiron*[6]. For philosophers, it designates infinity. The Myrmidons endowed it with their own meaning that designated all superfluous things such as trash, bones licked clean, and tornadoes.

One can evaluate Ajax's attempts at reform in many different ways, but they created a new situation. Aegina took leave of its weightless state and finally entered Greek

topography. This is probably why it started to attract peculiar visitors.

These were young people whose business, to speak in the most general way, was transportation: the transportation of ideas, by sea and by land.

Like the philosophers, they had the not very tactful habit of teaching others how to live. But unlike the philosophers, they did it in a more direct way, without intellectual intricacies, and sometimes quite violently. They taught the Myrmidons that everything important and essential takes place in one's head—that is, in an imaginary world—and that this world is stronger than the visible world. They also explained to the Myrmidons how miserable they were. The measure of their misfortune was the fact that they did not realize it at all. The main cause of their misery was their incompetent, weak government. Ajax should be thrown out and democracy introduced.

The Myrmidons, however, were unanimously content with their life. Why, then, should they throw out their gentle king? They showed total lack of interest in democracy because with typical, naive sincerity, they admitted they didn't know what it meant. It is possible, they said, the world tended in this direction, but why should they, the Myrmidons, be like the world instead of like themselves?

According to the holy principles of theory, revolutions are always carried out from "the bottom." In completely exceptional cases it is possible to contrive them from the top. This is of course a deviation, and as such should be carefully passed over in silence. Once everything is arranged, one must quickly invent a genesis, background, and chronology according to the principles of science. The transporters started secret negotiations with Ajax. They highly praised his desires for reforms, but—he had to admit it himself—he hadn't achieved much. To lead the Myrmidons out of their backwardness, dramatic methods had to be used. Bloodshed was necessary.

This word reappeared many times, in each conversation. Poor Ajax trembled all over, he grew pale, sometimes even wept. With all the gods as his witnesses, he swore nothing was

as foreign to him as violence, and that he would never allow any harm to be done to the inhabitants of the island. They answered that during truly unpleasant events he would be removed behind a curtain. The king grew pale, whimpered, and softened.

It is difficult to pass in silence over an obvious question: Why did Ajax agree to these conversations? They became a source of psychological torture for him. He was a free man, he could simply show his uninvited guests to the door: that is, beyond the perimeter of the shadowy oak tree.

The simple explanation of this enigma can be found in a strange trait in the nature of men. Instead of shrugging their shoulders, they consider it their sacred duty to answer idiotic questions and arrogant provocations, becoming in this way easy prey for various madmen. The dividing line between an accidental situation and a relationship lasting an entire life is very fluid; married couples know about this. It is possible to avoid many unpleasant occurrences, even catastrophes, by summoning the aid of common sense. But this is an extremely rare spiritual virtue, particularly among thinking, delicate individuals. Almost everyone carries inside him a vague sense of guilt, and from this guilt our neighbor, if he is a bit clever, can concoct dangerous things. Ajax considered himself a weak ruler, and in addition one who did not sufficiently love his subjects. The transporters knew it well. This knowledge was enough to undermine Ajax's psychological structure: metaphorically speaking, to conquer the fortress.

The transporters worked out a scenario and presented it to the king for his approval. It was simple (let us honor this subtlety). At a designated moment a kind of simulated coup would take place with all the appearances of being real. Ajax would be slightly wounded, and—this was planned beforehand—carried behind the curtains. A few Myrmidons would be accused of an attempt at regicide. During a public trial they would receive stiff punishment. At that moment the inhabitants of the island would naturally divide into supporters and adversaries of the coup; this would be the beginning of a productive antagonism. From then on affairs would proceed according to the laws of dialectics, from good forms to better

and better forms, until in the end the butterfly of perfection would take flight from its gray cocoon.

Indeed it almost happened. It is the Myrmidons, one must sadly admit, who with their inexcusable stubbornness and dullness bear the historical blame for causing the butterfly's death. Quite simply, none of those who were accused admitted their guilt. This sentence should be repeated several times, because it sounds absolutely fantastic. The gentle persuasions of the transporters, and their sophisticated tortures, came to nothing.

In their fierce stubbornness the Myrmidons said that to lift a stone, one first has to want to lift the stone (in other words, to kill a king one has to want to). Everyone knew that they loved their ruler, and what man of healthy mind would freely deprive himself, with his own free will, of the object of his love? They were not convinced by the argument that Ajax intended to sacrifice his life on the altar of a better future, because he had never talked about the topic. In fact nobody, not even a rabbit, wants to be killed. (Parenthetically, let us notice the primitive quality of the metaphors of the Myrmidons: a stone, a rabbit).

The accused were confirmed in their conviction that the king was no longer there. He had left for a better world; their resistance was useless, they were fighting for a shadow. But the Myrmidons, who knew the real value of shadow, defended themselves with the determination that comes from despair. Intellectually backward, they rejected without deeper reflection the argument that they did not want the murder subjectively, but objectively they did. This sophism, invented by semi-intellectuals with political inclinations, is older than it seems. In addition, the accused repeatedly asked their torturers how it was possible to sleep next to one's wife (this was exactly their case) and at the same time plot something in a distant location. (The principle of the excluded middle, moral rather than logical, undermined or enlarged by polyvalent logic that luckily had not been invented.)

Bitterness, revulsion, and spite filled the transporters' hearts to such an extent that they decided to end their mission

and abandon the island. To leave behind at least a small trace of their visit, they killed all those who were accused, without exception. This was supposed to mean that the ax was buried, but they would return at the first call of history.

The Myrmidons celebrated the restoration of monarchy in an atmosphere of unusual enthusiasm. What is strange is that Ajax returned in glory. If it was possible, he was loved even more ardently than before the short invasion. He tried to explain and justify himself. No one wanted to listen to him.

His sensitive conscience did not leave him in peace. He seemed to look at his subjects sadly, because nobody blamed him for anything. For him, their trust was a reproach, their total devotion a burden. So he asked his heavenly father to call him away from this mystic island where goodness was natural, evil came always from outside, and nothing—absolutely nothing—was in between.

For the second time, Zeus took pity on his son. He nominated him for a managerial position in the Department of Justice of the afterlife.

In the heat of narration we have forgotten to mention that Ajax was married twice and from each marriage had a son. Both boys, or rather men, were exceptionally handsome. It is difficult to say anything about their other merits. Only later did it turn out that they were unscrupulous, a trait in individuals who try to compensate for inborn dullness with an excess of ambition.

Here we suspend our tale, because just at this moment Clio enters the holy grove of myth: a big girl, tall, clumsy, strong as a horse, and coarse beyond words—the goddess of usurpers, repeating her worn-out clichés.

THIS HORRIBLE THERSITES

To Véronique Behrens

> The armies took their seats[1], marshaled in rows and according to ranks. But one man, Thersites, talked on endlessly, full of contention and insults. He baited the kings and looked hard—but in vain—for occasions to sow discord between them, provoking the Achaeans in every possible way and making them burst out in laughter.
>
> ILIAD

A COUNCIL OF THE Hellenic chieftains is taking place, disturbed by a strange individual named Thersites. He appears only once in the *Iliad*. In the tumult of battles and quarrels of commanders, his name disappears like a pin in a haystack.

Who was Thersites? According to Homer he was generally despised and had the appearance of a caricature—the ugliest warrior who came to Troy. Lame, with a caved-in chest, a skull warped to a point and covered by scraggly hair. The portrait of a real egghead. His physical appearance was a reflection of his spiritual qualities; in the poem Thersites is a coward, quarrelsome, and a constant grumbler.

Probing more deeply into the poem, we discover in the episode a wealth of meanings.

There are no background characters in the *Iliad*. The work is a gigantic bas-relief in which there is room only for the

heroes fighting against the background of a great plain. If names appear other than those of Achilles, Agamemnon, Diomedes, they are names of those who perished, about whom we know only that they lost their lives at Troy. So why did Homer make an exception for a man with no significance?

The first answer would be that he did it for reasons of composition. Into a stifling atmosphere of blood and violence, he wanted to introduce a comic moment, a *divertissement*, something to provide a moment of respite and pure laughter. But the poem develops inexorably along a straight line toward destiny. It has no detours from the action, comic episodes, or accidental events.

The name Thersites probably comes from a word meaning "arrogant," and this explains his personality. But Homer did not invent the character of Thersites; according to others the name means "brave" and "courageous." It could therefore be a name that carries a comic meaning, in contrast to Thersites' real personality. It is as if the name "Švejk" meant "fearless" in Czech.

Consequently one should not look for the answer to this riddle in onomastics.

Let us return to the poem.

What is Thersites doing in the *Iliad*? He interrupts the council of commanders. He criticizes Agamemnon, asserting that he is using the war to enrich himself, to accumulate conquered bronze and collect pretty female slaves. "Or still more gold are you wanting? More ransom a son / of the stallion-breaking Trojans might just fetch from Troy? / Though I or another Achean drags him back in chains?[2]"

So we are not dealing here with some general grumbling of Thersites, but a completely concrete, material cause for dissent. Does the unjust division of spoils—the captive Briseis taken by Agamemnon—determine the axis of the poem?

Thersites dares to bring charges against the commander not only on his own behalf but on behalf of those who are silent. Therefore he seems to be a voice for the injured.

But who, really, was Thersites? In Homer his social rank is not clear. If he was an ordinary camp follower, he would not have been admitted to the councils of commanders. His name does not appear on the list of ships, so he was not a commander himself. This much we can deduce directly from Homer.

As we said, the author of the *Iliad* did not invent Thersites' name; in other myths he is nothing less than a king of Aetolia[3], son of Agrios and cousin of Diomedes, a hero of the Trojan War and one of the few who—like Nestor—returned from Troy alive.

Other myths tell that Thersites took part in a hunt for a Caledonian boar that was ravaging the fields of Meleander. A quarrel broke out during the hunt, and Thersites was thrown from a cliff. Thus his repulsive lameness was not inborn but acquired in a fight. Mythology made Thersites a cripple. Indeed he did not deserve the degrading thrashing given by Odysseus in front of everybody in the *Iliad*. Precisely by Odysseus, who was not especially distinguished by bravery, who pretended to be a madman plowing the ocean sand in order to avoid taking part in the expedition to Troy.

How did Thersites come to an end? Homer doesn't mention it. According to other legends, the direct cause of death was a quarrel—again a quarrel—with Achilles.

We know that the Amazons, under the command of the beautiful queen Penthesilea, took part in the last phase of the combat on the side of Ilium. In these battles Achilles mortally wounded Penthesilea—a favorite motif of many painters[4] of vases. A more brutal version of the myth says that Achilles fell in love with Penthesilea's dead body and committed, on the spot, an act of necrophilia. This, on the other hand, seems to be a favorite theme of modernist dramas about love and death.

Thersites rightly ridiculed Achilles for this repulsive action, and the hero, lacking any arguments to defend himself, knocked out all of Thersites' teeth and sent his soul to Erebus.

So much for the myths.

Today we can look differently at Thersites, without Homer's consent. Who was he? A representative of the vanquished, perhaps a Minoan prince stripped of power by the Achaeans.

His only weapon was abuse, the rebellion of the helpless—without hope but precisely because of that, deserving admiration and respect.

CLEOMEDES

ASTIPALEA.

A small island of the Sporades Archipelago southeast of the Peloponnesus—strictly speaking it is two islands connected by a narrow, wet isthmus. Less than a hundred square kilometers of sand, rocks, and scanty vegetation.

What can be said about this place on the earth? Not much, almost nothing. And it is this that seems completely exceptional in a country populated beyond measure with true and legendary history, a country where every cave, forest, spring, and mountain repeats the echo of the gods.

With sadness it must be stated this island was not a cradle of the arts and wisdom, a homeland for explorers of stars, poets, able potters, or even a dynasty of rulers whose picturesque crimes could be the subject of a tragedy. None of its men won fame on the fields of great battles, none of its women were visited by Zeus to become mothers of unpredictable heroes.

Everything here was ordinary, commonplace, flat. Patient sheep trod the summit of the highest elevation called a mountain due to patriotic impulse. The capital: a gathering of pitiful white houses, a noisy agora, a few squat, graceless temples. That was all. Even catastrophes worthy of note, epidemics and earthquakes bypassed the island.

The destiny of Astipalea[1] was, thus, mediocrity. One had to be reconciled to this. Life in the shadow, a quiet recess the storms of history don't reach, all of that has its charm. But although we appreciate our own safety, we hold it against our ancestors if not one had the courage to take part in a dangerous

expedition or perish on the field of a famous battle, in a word, if they failed to achieve anything worthy of song.

And so the inhabitants of Astipalea experienced a feeling of shame as they listened to the rhapsodes. Someone even had the mad notion of supplementing the famous catalogue of ships in the *Iliad* to include just one from Astipalea—or of appointing a youth from the island as driver for one of the heroes who struggled at Troy. One can't deny these were modest ambitions. The philologists gently call them interpolations. But at the time we are writing about, the texts of both poems were definitively established, and an attempt to encroach on a past both sacred and fixed would have inevitably provoked jeering. No one in his right mind hesitates when confronted with the cruel choice, eternal ridicule or eternal repudiation.

An obstinate yearning, a collective will working in hiding, untiringly, the hope of many nameless generations that a day will come when the island is born a second time, if only for a moment—all this was fulfilled in a surprisingly simple way. In the family of a blacksmith, a boy was brought into the world and given the name Cleomedes. In this or a similar manner all great tales of humanity ought to begin.

Later the irresistible need for a miracle found prophetic signs and multiplied them: an old oak split on the day of Cleomedes' birth, an eagle could be seen circling above the city. Others spoke of a high tidal wave, of fog assuming shapes of the Olympian gods, a rainbow, and also a strange light that came not from above but it seemed from the center of the earth, transforming this crumb of land into a pale morning star.

The young Cleomedes was meek, quiet, and shy. The gods sent him two gifts that rarely come in pairs and are therefore considered contradictory: beauty and strength. Beauty is a static trait and is inherent—like the beauty of a flower, an ocean bay or a fair summer night. It is content with itself, sure of its own rights, and can ultimately dispense with confirmation, a contest or wreath. The beautiful lead a quiet life and are rarely entangled in dramatic adventures. With strength it is entirely different. Its essence is a challenge thrown to people and to the world. It manifests itself only in

struggle, in receiving and administering blows, in a growing pyramid of deeds more and more unimaginable and murderous.

Allow us to interrupt chronology and note that several centuries after the events described here, an Alexandrian versifier slapped together a poem about the youth of Cleomedes the Athlete. Preserved fragments of this inept work can be found in poetry manuals as frightening models of disastrous versification—of stilted pathos and poverty of the imagination—because the author ascribed the deeds of other heroes in the past to his protagonist, ignoring the fact that Astipalea could be the setting of a satirical drama at most, but not of a tragedy requiring pathetic scenery.

After all, no one on this island had ever met a god face to face. The landscape was monotonous, without lions, giants, horses devouring people, monsters of the earth or the sea, tyrants, or even a cleft in the rocks leading to the kingdom of the dead.

Only a single report worthy of confidence says that during a local religious ceremony—a sculpture of marble was taking the place of an old wooden statue of Athena—Cleomedes walked at the head of the procession carrying the huge stone goddess as lightly as an olive branch.

It was decided to send the young man to Sparta, so he could concentrate on thorough studies under the eyes of experienced preceptors. This usually meant training the mind in philosophy and mathematics, as well as acquiring the ability to construct long, ornate sentences and intricate syllogisms. In keeping with his vocation, Cleomedes practiced horseback riding, driving chariots, perfecting himself in the art of throwing the discus and javelin, in running both naked and wearing armor, in the pentathlon, wrestling and boxing.

So he was sent to numerous competitions, provincial to be sure and as a rule ignored by eminent sculptors. This is why we know almost everything about his fate but next to nothing about his physical appearance, because not a single portrait has been preserved of his head, his torso, or heel.

Connoisseurs admired Cleomedes' particular manner of fighting. Always concentrated, and peculiarly devoid of ambition; impersonal, as if submitting to a strange power that led him from victory to victory. He used his energy reasonably, with moderation, conscious it was a favor from fate and, therefore, something given to him with a short lease. His reserves of strength were suspected to be enormous but he drew from them cautiously, so he wouldn't overstep the limits marked out by the jealous gods.

Was he a favorite of the public? In the stadium and theater the audience wants to experience purification through fear and pity, it wants to follow the struggle of passions, blind verdicts of fate, silent defeats and noisy triumphs. Cleomedes, however, invariably carried out a solitary struggle with his own body. The presence of adversaries was indifferent to him, they formed a motionless background and from it the victor would imperceptibly emerge, always surprised, never quite believing it was he and not someone else who deserved admiration and, well, even worship.

A modest hero is an engaging figure, and no one asks whether it is an acquired pose or if the source of such an attitude should be looked for in the deep strata of the soul. What, indeed, is a timid and pale victor? An odd hybrid, an awkward oxymoron, someone carrying an incurable flaw. It seems that Cleomedes' flaw was his complete inability to identify with his own actions. Internally split, somewhat alarming, he was, in fact, frightfully…boring.

This is why the famous Spartan athlete Telestes, patron and guardian of the youth from Astipalea, declared that at the approaching pan-Hellenic games, Cleomedes would enter as a boxer, even though he possessed so many other athletic talents auguring laurels. The decision was arbitrary and final. In everything irreversible we have a tendency to see the interference of supernatural forces governing the world—in reality the matter can be completely explained in human categories.

Telestes' intention was simple and shows his discernment in applied pedagogy. For he decided that only in a boxing

match would Cleomedes achieve Form, that is, Individual Shape, and at last become someone defined who could be distinguished from others without difficulty or hesitation. For what is boxing? A battle that is open, masculine, even more an allegory of war, a prefiguration of the struggle between life and death. Telestes reasoned exactly that this would force his pupil to mobilize all his dormant forces to answer aggression with aggression, to be rid of his provincial shyness once and for all and become at last a convincing, distinct, happy victor.

Cleomedes' departure for the games was the greatest celebration ever experienced in Astipalea. Almost all the inhabitants of the island gathered at the port. For a long time, noisily and with effusive affection, they said farewell to the future victor (no one doubted it) who would be the first in history to cover their native land with glory.

The opponent of Cleomedes was the famous boxer Hikkos of Epidaurus, who had come close to the victor's laurels twice before at the Olympic Games. This time, sure of victory, he went into the encounter without guarding himself, striking with a huge open hand similar to a stern teacher thrashing an unruly pupil. A fight must be a drama with an epilogue difficult to foresee, a game in which the scales of victory sway; it ought to abound in surprises, tactical devices, stratagems, sharp attacks and lightning-fast returns—meanwhile the spectators were treated to a boring monologue. So they shouted to interrupt the match and send the unfortunate youth back to where he came from, that is, to his shabby island and sheep.

Then Cleomedes proceeded to attack. But it was an attack in his particular style, hardly perceptible, like everything he did—not showy, sluggish in appearance.

The reports by witnesses are contradictory and unclear. They had difficulty in grasping not so much the meaning of the event as its individual fragments.

It was like this. At first Hikkos stood still as if struck by amazement, then he retreated several steps. Some said he looked around helplessly and suddenly toppled over in the

sand with his arms outspread. It lasted a very short time. None of the spectators realized what had happened.

The judges of the games were confronted with a difficult task, a fact without precedent that went beyond the power of judgment. For a dark image concealed everything, and images obstinately resist the efforts of interpreters. Here in full sunlight, in the middle of the arena, something heavy was lying enclosed in itself, soaked in mystery—an object. This is why the verdict of the referees is marked by frightened helplessness.

It was confirmed first of all that Cleomedes didn't transgress any of the minutely established and strictly observed rules of combat. His adversary had not raised his right hand: the sign of surrender. And yet Hikkos had died. Hikkos was not alive. Cleomedes was cleared of the charge of intentional manslaughter, but was refused the victor's wreath. Therefore the duel was unresolved.

The intention of the judges can be considered understandable, morally irreproachable, praiseworthy. But from the point of view of logic, their reasoning was full of gaps, inconsistencies, and contradictions, for no one established what should have been the first and fundamental premise, that is, the cause of Hikkos's death. Can the accidental death of a participant be excluded? A poet who has died over an unfinished poem stirs generous understanding in the hearts of women and even of critics, so why refuse these tender sympathies to boxers? Further, if Cleomedes fought honestly and was judged to have no blame, why was he punished? Finally, wasn't this rather unfortunate phrase about a duel with no victor a cowardly attempt to overthrow the laws of fate, which always decide irrevocably and cruelly—it was also true in this case—leaving only the defeated and the victor on the field?

Cleomedes was plunged into sorrow and despair. He rejected the world, which he had never understood anyway. Therefore, perhaps the rejection was not a great one. On the other hand, it was fraught with consequences.

It was foreign to the ancients to rummage in the labyrinths of individual souls, and they would have said his reason was darkened by the sinister goddess Ate[2], disturber of the minds of gods and men. For believers, such an interpretation is sufficient. But when we describe what followed, we will try to avoid psychology as well as lofty symbolism and limit ourselves to a simple presentation of the facts, as with Pausanias[3] who first recorded the story.

So Cleomedes returns to Astipalea. He sets out in the direction of the city. A school building is next to the road, and the madness of the unfortunate Olympic athlete is vented upon it. The wooden columns collapse. Under the rubble sixty children find their death.

The inhabitants of the island want to inflict punishment on the criminal at the place of the crime: that is, to stone him to death. Cleomedes succeeds in tearing himself away. He flees to the temple of Athena. The relentless crowd pursues him.

In the temple is a stone chest, as large as a royal vault and reserved for the storage of sacred objects. Cleomedes pushes aside the heavy lid and slips inside.

At just that moment the avengers appear in the temple. They carefully look at every bend of the wall, every nook and cranny. Nor do they overlook the huge stone chest. In vain, Cleomedes has vanished without a trace.

When we read the story by Pausanias we instinctively feel a disquieting lack of a point, a moral, a…bottom. The protagonist suddenly leaves the scene and sinks from sight without a word. The Messenger and the omniscient Chorus who bring the voices of the world to the scene are silent about his fate. It is exactly this that glaringly contradicts the fundamental laws of classical drama and, even more, any art expressed in closed and understandable forms.

In the Theater of the Absurd, Cleomedes could have counted on quite a career. Only a chronic lack of education in the men of letters working toward the multiplication of chaos explains the astounding fact that they have not discovered this golden vein; they would have a ready anti-hero of flesh and

blood, not watery words, also a subject shimmering with the dark colors of the absurd.

Returning to the interrupted plot: we must emphatically stress what is essential, namely, the close kinship of Cleomedes with the elements. He was a modest athlete and didn't know very well what to do with his great gift. He understood that nature had endowed him with strength that neither he nor anyone else knew how to master. Mastery is not the domain of genius but of barely capable individuals who possess the art of imitating passions and safely balancing over the abyss. Cleomedes lacked this ability. It is why the tale about him takes place on the frontier between human affairs and the phenomena of nature. Down the steep slope of a mountain, or a narration, crushing everything in its way, rolls a boulder. Only ruins and victims remain. But catastrophes after all are innocent.

The bottom, the true bottom of the story of Cleomedes was absolutely real: several decaying planks on the floor of our hero's hideout that collapsed under his weight. He crashed through. He recovered in a dark interior similar to a small, damp cave.

The temple of Athena stood on a hill near the sea. The city had no defenses, but we know that wars and even pirates bypassed miserable Astipalea. It is hard to say why those who erected the temple dug a subterranean passage under the foundations that was soon forgotten.

For a long time Cleomedes crawled in darkness. When he came out at the shore it was night. He found a boat, and the loud sea carried him away.

Cleomedes' wanderings abounded in all the necessary elements of an epic tale: intricate adventures, labyrinths of deserts, summits and depths, terror and vast landscapes. But a sinister shadow followed him that shattered the meaning of his sufferings and struggles, ravaged his being from within, and pushed him deeper and deeper into the domain of inhuman creation. Who was he? An atom wandering in the void of the universe.

Our loyal compassion has accompanied the peregrinations of Odysseus for centuries; this is because the wanderings of the King of Ithaca have supernatural and, at the same time, human dimensions. They move heaven and earth, envious and friendly gods, sirens, monsters, and the hearts of listeners. But the true source of our empathy is the simple fact that all the torments and blows falling on the hero were the price paid for the return to his homeland. Cleomedes' road runs in exactly the opposite direction—he was running away from his beloved island where only a stony death awaited him. He was a deserter from fate.

Finally he reached Corinth, and decided to remain for some time because the feeling of fear left him—not completely but sufficiently for him to recover. He didn't choose this place for its attractions, but simply because ships from different parts of the world landed here and, therefore, news of his beloved Astipalea would reach him, news bringing forgiveness or damnation forever. Even if this did not happen, it was the most suitable place on earth where one could disappear for the second and final time.

The would-be Olympic victor joined the royally hospitable and voluminously bottomless class of ancient proletarians. They were different from slaves because they were not offered for sale, therefore the price of their lives and drudgery was not measurable. The adjective "ancient" is not a decorative epithet but a definition of a place in time. The face of extreme poverty is always, everywhere, equally immovable and repulsive.

He was living, then, in a crowd of the poor cooped up under a naked sky or in wretched mud huts beyond the limits of the splendid city, in an area of abandonment without frontiers. Fires would burn here long into the night, the small lights looking like those of a large, weary, besieging army struck by inertia. Even wakefulness and sleep are not justly distributed among people.

Cleomedes worked by the sweat of his brow. He carried clay to ceramic workshops, sometimes he was employed at the ovens casting the famous Corinthian bronzes, but mostly he worked in the port, an evil, noisy arena of deposed athletes.

The city—wealthy, licentious, and huge—lay beyond the borders of his curiosity.

So the groove of his existence was desperately narrow: from the hovel where he slept, to work, and back, that's all. Above his head he had immeasurable time, homogeneous as the air and, like air, without promises. The earthly fate of Cleomedes was fragile, and perhaps for that reason he felt safe in the universe. Degradation gives certainty. There is no better hiding place, no better hospice, than the bottom.

The main concern, or to speak loftily, spiritual occupation, of Cleomedes was waiting. The goal of waiting was to return to Astipalea. He knew it would happen when the witnesses of his crime had died out and as a reward for his patient fidelity, fate would favor him with the gift of death on his native island, ordinary and innocent as birth.

In the beginning he asked all the sailors he met if they had happened to land on the shores of Astipalea. The majority didn't even know the name. Some had seen it from a distance—a dark stone projecting above the surface of the water. Soon Cleomedes gave up his investigations. His simple philosophy was based on reasoning similar to the manner of thinking of lovers, that is, without logic: I am an inseparable part of my land, we were violently separated, if there is any order in the world our incomplete existences must be brought together again.

How could Cleomedes' state of mind be described? We know little about his inner life. But it seems that obvious and worn-out designations like "homesickness" and "nostalgia" can hardly be considered accurate in the case of a protagonist whose nature was marvelously uncomplicated and therefore escaped analysis.

In one of their hermetic texts, the Pythagoreans warn against "eating one's own heart." It should be understood figuratively as a prohibition against sinking into fruitless despair. We can suppose that despite sensible advice, Cleomedes fed himself with his own heart—and it was continually restored, beating strongly with a healthy, hopeless, filial attachment.

He was patient, concentrated as always, enclosed within himself, and self-sufficient. He humbly submitted to the powerful force of time. He well knew that hard labor, the flogging of frost, rain and heat would finally change his skin, furrow deep clefts in his face, bend his back, and give him an uncertain, wobbly step. Then he would be able to return safely to Astipalea. He was waiting for the torn costume of an ancient vagabond from nowhere.

If he had worries, there was only one: he was aging too slowly. In spite of the laws of nature and his own efforts, he still resembled the youth who departed on that memorable morning for a victor's laurels.

Years passed.

Modern poetics rejects similar sentences with disgust; they are just as suspect as, for example, a statement that "the last rays of the setting sun fell on an old house hidden in the shade of centennial lindens," or, "the shapely breast of the countess Julietta was shaken by strange sobs." Aesthetes say they are ugly and banal. That may be. But is it fitting to decorate matters that are profound and ordinary—that is to say, universal—with the artificial flowers of style? And so, years passed.

Chance—the other side of the coin conventionally called necessity, or its capricious variation, horribly unsystematic and absentminded—chance caused our hero to meet quite unexpectedly in the port a man who had seen Astipalea with his own eyes and was there not long ago. Cleomedes was delighted and invited him that evening to his fire.

The man's name, Heliodorus, should be interpreted as a pretentious pseudonym attached to a small, active, sweaty figure condemned to the eternal torment of throwing out of himself an unending number of words and sounds. Those who have been in the Piraeus and seen the sellers of fortunes know what this is.

By profession he was a wandering peddler of devotional objects. When business in this line weakened or became disappointing, he was also an unlicensed poet. There is no

contradiction in this. Both these professions have gone hand in hand for thousands of years.

An inventory of Heliodorus's jumble of odds and ends: Egyptian (or facsimiles of Egyptian) amulets, Babylonian love elixirs, clay figurines that caused sudden death to a hated person when pierced with pins—or, if it was desired, a long and painful one. He also interpreted dreams. He always explained them to the advantage of the dreamer (little caring about the subconscious, that idol not yet invented) because he knew that people crave comfort.

He treated the world as a phenomenon with a certain shade of indulgence and even contempt. He thought it an absurd joke of the Demiurge, and foretold its approaching end. This also comforted those who despaired. And he was an execrable poet. At this time the art of the wandering aodists was in complete decline; the few who had something to say recorded their thoughts and stanzas on papyrus rolls.

So they met at night and, either from his heart's need or perhaps giving in to the prompting of naive cunning, Cleomedes asked Heliodorus to describe Astipalea as accurately as he could. His description agreed exactly with the real topography. Our hero was calmed, dreamy—he made himself a comfortable place near the fire and covered himself with a coat. Tales that grow from the earth are best listened to in a lying position.

The rhapsode moved along smoothly, apart from a number of obstacles typical of the genre such as literary devices, recurrences, descriptions of nature, retardations, and moaning apostrophes to the Olympian deities. Aside from these everything was true: the mysterious death of Hikkos, the hecatomb of the children, the chase, the escape to the temple. Then came the turn for the second part, and as Cleomedes listened about Cleomedes he was plunged into a story he didn't know at all.

From the hoarse, epic tale of Heliodorus, we will try to pick out only the essentials, the mood of the crowd, and the facts.

This is how it was. When the inhabitants of Astipalea discovered beyond any doubt that Cleomedes had disappeared without a trace, like a dissolving cloud, they were struck by an astonishment so great it took away anger and the desire for revenge. It was not the naive, human astonishment we experience at the sight of a calf with two heads or falling stars, but something leading to the depths, and toward the threatening abysses of final matters. The color of the crowd's feeling became darker, the anxiety turned to fear, fear became terror. A great covering of mystery stretched over the little island. Everyone waited for the end and believed that the deluge, pestilence, fire, and beasts were standing at the gates of Astipalea.

In fact, all that could be observed—and that nothing could explain—was a metamorphosis of light. Nothing dangerous on the surface, as long as the sun's chariot rolled along its ordinary path. But now the inhabitants of the island were sensitive to every change, and they fearfully noticed every occurrence that seemed to go beyond the sphere of admissible normality.

Here in the middle of a moonless night, small lights started to emerge from under the earth, and crept low to the ground, blinking on and off. Almost each day brought new signs. Everyone commented on a certain sunset stripped of any transparent burning red, a sunset completely yellow like saffron—then a pale dusk lasting too long, a silent, tall, hard twilight suddenly giving way to basalt darkness as if cut off by an ax. Even at noon, when the sharp light rang down from above, scaring away all half-shades and spectres of colors, one could see the flight of hardly noticeable clouds dragging behind them on the earth hues of lead, hues of heavy crimson, of ash.

All this was associated with the sudden departure of Cleomedes and portended, unavoidably, approaching catastrophe. Thus at night processions went by the light of torches along the flat shores of Astipalea, carrying prayers to the immortal gods: that plagues be diverted, and that he who had disappeared so absurdly should return to his homeland, for his sins had been forgiven.

Because these and other rituals had no effect, it was decided to send a few frightened citizens to the oracle at Delphi. Heliodorus described the navigation at great length, multiplying the dangers and adventures beyond any need. For this, let him be forgiven. He succumbed to form, and form often devours content.

It is universally known that the oracle expressed itself in an intricate, opaque manner. This not only failed to diminish its authority, on the contrary it raised it. After all, the language of the eternal ones must differ from the language of mortals. This can be explained also in a down-to-earth manner: man cannot endure a naked, self-contained, silent mystery. If it is accompanied by words, especially those that are dark and extremely disheveled, it becomes easier to bear.

This time the voice of the oracle was clear, unambiguous, and emphatically articulated. Heliodorus made a solemn pause, then pronounced this divine couplet, recorded by Pausanias.

Cleomedes of Astipalea—last of the line of heroes—

Is immortal—therefore pay him due honor.

Thus the story. It ends with the most elevated chord that can be imagined, namely an Assumption.

Heliodorus didn't neglect to boast he saw with his own eyes the monument raised to the glory of Cleomedes by the inhabitants of Astipalea. The statue was huge, somewhat bulky, and represented a young man with his hands stretched lengthwise along the body, his fists clenched, and with a mysterious smile, the left leg set slightly forward. Every year on the day of his miraculous disappearance, sacrifices of young sheep were placed at the base of the monument.

Heliodorus fell silent. He was waiting. Like all authors, he was waiting for praise. The man for whom the tale was destined lay motionless on his back, and did not reveal the least emotion.

The wandering poet bent over him. He saw a face in which it was impossible to perceive the majesty of death, or any majesty at all, rather a helpless, blunt, frozen astonishment.

Heliodorus covered the head with a coat and went to the nearby fires of neighbors, for he knew that poor people crave comfort.

NARCISSUS

CONTRARY TO THE legend that attributes great beauty to Narcissus, he was a commonplace boy with vulgar features, a spotty complexion, broad shoulders and lanky limbs. He was the very image of those saps with electric guitars or film stars who search in vain for the meaning of life in the pits of their empty souls, who end up badly after idiotic peregrinations, while a sober spectator remembers from their orgy of drinking, brawling, and bed-hopping only the make of the car that obligingly carried them into a ravine.

It was Caravaggio who passed on the most credible portrait of Narcissus. The painting hangs in the Villa Borghese[1] and represents a street urchin, one of those boys[2] who kill their benefactors with a fence board. The urchin leans over a pond. Caravaggio knew all about it. We can trust him.

For sheer lack of other interests, Narcissus dedicated his life to breaking hearts. Brutal and cynical—humanity inflected in *argot*—he was beloved of naïve girls and even mature women with a taste for his type, expecting God knows what, perhaps his ultimate domestication. He could therefore count on a lengthy artistic career. However, brutality and stupidity require a binding agent, a third element to create a durable molecule of character. Most often that element is sentimentality. So he, too, fell in love.

His chosen one was named Echo. Her eyes, not large, were of a color hard to determine, her mouth and ears were small. She was a cripple to boot.

It is difficult to define her body's extraordinary skin tone, and in any case the word skin is out of place here, as we associate it with flesh. Echo was pale, on the verge of

ghostliness, a mute, watery, fish-like paleness. One had the impression that if anyone gave her a sharp look-over—which no one did, out of pity—he would easily discover under the thin ganze of her skin her delicate bone structure and little fluttering heart.

From the time of the Trojan expedition to the beginning of the Third World War—a fair amount of time—no one, but no one, ever threw back her head like she did. The shattering splendor of that sight could obviate any hermit's years of asceticism. It was done without the aid of her hands, starting from a turning motion of her slender neck, so fast that it eluded one's notice, then a short tense pause, she bent her whole body, and the bright hair broke like a wave on her shoulders, waiting only for an appropriate moment to return to its place and once again screen the forehead and eyes, lending her face a mysterious, animal and yet innocent sacrificial aspect, which Greuze and other Rococo lechers reproduced with lewd enthusiasm.

The irresistable charm of Echo's looks was best expressed in the casual, oft-repeated remarks people made at the very sight of her: "She truly couldn't manage to take ten steps on her own strength" or "She won't last the winter if she isn't supported by some powerful arm."

How to describe Echo's handicap? Some said she was mute, but that term is not accurate. For Echo literally and clearly repeated the last two words that ended any sentence directed toward her. However, she never spoke on her own initiative. It accorded entirely with her nature—indolent, phlegmatic, passive.

Narcissus' love for Echo began to wither from the moment the boy realized he was becoming increasingly dependent on his chosen one—losing his freedom. The charm of guardianship faded. Narcissus got it into his head that Echo was ruining his spiritual life, as if you could ruin something that doesn't exist. Nothing extraordinary about that—many wonderfully promising young people abandon their studies, claiming all professors are idiots, which may have a grain of truth in it, but one shouldn't make such crass generalizations,

or they leave the Church to join some obscure sect, proclaiming to the world that the traditional God the Father has shamefully betrayed the hope invested in him.

There was a break-up. Narcissus did not return to his former activities. He began to ruminate.

Echo, on the other hand, entered the convent of nature. There were no other convents at that time. When groups of eccentrics, loaded down with cold chicken, sandwiches and hard-boiled eggs visit the canyons, ravines, backwoods and fields, the invisible Echo accompanies the explorers, repeating the last two words of their resounding hoots. You could say that despair drove her to become a stewardess of the natural world.

And Narcissus, as said before, mused.

ENDYMION[1]

THE STORY IS simple and as old as the world. A Great Lady falls in love with a young boy from a lower social class. All the variants of the delicate situation have been sufficiently described by world literature. In this case there is an additional complication: the Lady is the goddess of the moon, and the object of her affection, a hunter. This stunning disproportion in their status augurs nothing good.

Sudden Ionian dusk falls. Tired from a full day of hunting, Endymion lies on the slope of Mount Latmos. Tightly wrapped in the scent of thyme and lavender, he falls into a deep sleep. At the same time Selene makes her routine inspection of the night firmament and notices the small figure, his face trustingly turned to the sky, the mouth open, arms widely spread. Truly he looks like a child fallen from a cradle, and so —overcome by a sudden wave of tenderness—Selene leaves her chariot, approaches the boy, and spends a few unforgettable moments with him.

What a pity it did not end there. It would be a graceful subject for a small bas-relief. Best of all would be a *gemma*, yes, a concave *gemma* cut in onyx which opalizes with pale light, concealing under its smooth, milky surface not a mystery but just a night secret.

The morning after the episode, which insisted on being something more than an episode, Selene appeared before Zeus. After a night excursion of doubtful nature he returned to Olympus, and in a very bad mood was about to settle outstanding business. Paler than usual, Selene could barely control herself.

—I am in love, she confessed.

—That’s fine. Quite fine, Zeus said thoughtlessly.

His answer did not measure up to the situation. Zeus knew quite well that Selene—cool, mirrorlike, and distinguished—was the only puritanical goddess. When such people have a love affair they completely lose their heads, and are capable of anything. The matter was serious. It required careful investigation.

—When did it happen? he asked. That is, since when?

—That’s unimportant. I know I have always loved him.

—Could I at least know the lucky man’s name?

—Endymion.

—Endymion? Never heard of him.

—Endymion, a hunter, Selene explained with pride in her voice that was difficult to understand.

Yes, thought Zeus, it has happened. Once you fall, then you really fall far.

—Endymion, you say. Is he at least well-built?

—He is beautiful, very tender, and certainly wise, although I haven’t had a chance yet to find out. We were together only for a moment.

—And this is how it ought to end.

—I don’t understand.

—This is how it ought to end. This shepherd of yours…

—Hunter. Selene, close to tears, corrected Zeus.

—It’s all the same. Remember, and I say this from experience, only fleeting moments have any value. Leave him in peace, if you want to have happy memories.

—I don’t want memories, Zeus, I want Endymion.

—Soon you’ll find out that Endymion—what a ridiculous name!—speaks nonsense, wheezes like a bull, and is unfaithful to you with some stable girl. An ordinary worm. Grayness wrapped in the nauseating odor of decomposition.

—Can you understand, Zeus, it was exactly his smell that seduced me?

—Smell?

The father of the gods, who was sensitive only to sensations of touch, showed interest.

—Yes, said Selene. I love his smell. Humans call it sweat.

This was a perversion Zeus could not understand. Yet Selene spoke with exaltation.

—You must understand. Endymion carries on his skin the smell of beech leaves, of pine needles, water, heat, sticky buds, ancient moss, the sweet fragrance of raspberries, pungent juniper, the undefinable smell of wing sheathes, bracing acids of ant hills, the odors of animals he kills, the smell of their pelts, blood, fear. And many, many others I can't name. You will say, Zeus, this is nothing special for someone so completely blended with nature by his profession. I agree. But what I am speaking about is merely the surface, the outside of a shell. Inside is the smell of Endymion himself, different from all other smells and impossible to describe. In medicine it is called a characteristic odor.

Zeus listened intently. Here was a back alley of reality bypassed by the gods: aromas and odors. The times had long since passed when the inhabitants of the heavens obediently followed nomads and held on to them tightly, inhaling with flared nostrils the sacrificial odors of burnt meat and tallow. At that time smoke was the only proof they existed, proof of a fleeting affirmation they were necessary until theology and poetry erected more permanent, subtle and irrefutable monuments for them. Now the fragrances on Olympus were indistinct, marblelike, elevated and abstract rather than concrete. To speak plainly they were insipid, without character. Zeus thought: we abandoned the sensations of smell too thoughtlessly. Maybe they have the ability to increase other sensations, so it might be worthwhile to introduce smells that are sharp, exciting, even blasphemous into the palace of the immortals. I must think about it.

Still, there wasn't the slightest doubt that Selene was now beside herself. Zeus dryly said he emphatically forbade any further relations with the young butcher of forest animals. If she wanted to continue her studies of life in lower social spheres, why not widen her investigations and include hat-makers, donkey herdsmen and sailors? They too had a smell. He demanded that a report be made the following morning, at the latest, to definitely close the matter.

Selene left, completely crushed.

Next morning when she reappeared, she was transformed. Bold and clear madness shone in her eyes. Without warning, she declared she could not live without Endymion.

—Think of that, said the father of the gods. She "can't live" without him! But we are Pure Form, Being without alternative, the essence of duration. I can comfort you, however, that what you are experiencing now will be repeated many times in the future.

—That is what is terrible. I yearn for what is unrepeatable and unique, mortal, splendidly finite, earthly and final, whispered Selene.

Zeus was overcome by a powerful, purple wave of royal fury. Before each explosion he couldn't deny himself the pleasure of delivering a small sermon.

—Remember who you are, Selene. Lady of melancholy, of phases and crescents, Lady of long litanies of mists, Lady of waters. This is how people pray to you—a generous dispenser who bestows the cheap jewelry of the sky on everyone. So many matters have been entrusted to your care. You lead lunatic pilgrims on a narrow foot-bridge between exaltation and the abyss, you move the huge gills of the oceans, you draw the dragnets of the tides. You teach kings the softening of contrasts, that each work of art has to have its own light and be steep like a mirror. How many times have you saved lost wanderers and led the longing arms of lovers toward each other?

At this point Zeus got stuck. He had made a blunder. This was definitely the wrong note to strike; the entire homily was

wasted. His words rolled with the force of inertia, beads of images whirled in a circle, and no moral came from it. He was the victim of a disastrously chosen tone. All those silly *affettuoso*[2] *con tenerezza*[3] completed the devastation. Finally, to get out of the rhetorical tangle, he roared:

—Selene, Selene! Leave the crooked path and return to the way of virtue. After all, you belong to the triumphant church of astronomy. Do you, or don't you?

There was a long silence. Selene said:

—I understand your anxiety. There is only one way out. You must transform Endymion into an immortal.

At this, a dry clap of the thunder rolled over the world.

Selene, who until now had so scrupulously fulfilled her cosmic duties, would not obey. If she disappeared from the scene it would not be too bad. It could be explained as a momentary indisposition, a sudden change of program. A general repair. But who could have suspected the goddess of having resources of black humor, or a sophisticated ability to gradually increase gothic horror? For now a huge shield appeared on the horizon and remained there the whole night, bloody, motionless, lying in wait. Then again the moon glided in a drunken zigzag, frightening hordes of clouds—or it climbed to the peak of the sky and, after a fearful wait, tumbled down like a rock. No voice—and that was the most frightening—accompanied this insane pathology. A leaden silence hung on the heights while dogs howled below, the sea stepped out of its shores, and the stock exchange, that infallible barometer of social moods, sank in delirium.

In some societies the defects now revealed in the sky's mechanics were greeted with enthusiasm, and appropriate conclusions were drawn. A certain wavering of spirit, characteristic of democracies, was transformed into laborious anarchy; and the old nihilism of those who despair was replaced by a new and energetic, vital version that gathered momentum. After a period of joyful destruction and total negation came a period of New Synthesis, which triumphantly proclaimed that truth and falsehood are not contradictory,

while crime and virtue, barbarity and civilization, can and should coexist peacefully. Only a few perceived it was nothingness that noiselessly detonated—silent explosions of nonsense shaking the oases of freedom.

In totalitarian regimes vigilance was increased. This meant a shift from painful repression to coldly calculated mass terror. The rulers proclaimed that the blow dealt to a brother by a brother's hand can always be rationalized, and is therefore less painful than the blind, irrational violence of nature. The people were thus steeled for the onset of the unknown. One must bow one's head at the animal patience of subjects. In their collective ecstasies of submission, they reached incredible heights or, if one prefers, the very bottom of degradation.

Poor Python[4]! In vain, completely in vain you left your hiding place to take part in the apocalypse predicted by prophecies. No one even noticed you. Broken and humiliated, you dragged yourself to your depot near Delphi, filled with the bitter knowledge that humanity had matured and become sufficiently monstrous to take the steering wheel of annihilation into its own hands.

Time pressed. One had to act, and act energetically. To bestow immortality on Endymion was out of the question. At that moment Zeus remembered a young scholar, who several times had rendered small but valuable services. Hypnos[5], yes Hypnos, no one else, only Hypnos could bar the path to raging anarchy.

He was a modest, taciturn young man who studied the phenomenon of sleep. Much later, in the period of decline, he was turned into the brother of death, and a major part in this was played by poets who thought their task was to comfort and tame what ought to remain wild, contradictory, and inconceivable. Equipped with a precise, analytical mind, Hypnos studied dreams as a sickness of the body. This is why he must be strictly distinguished from that gang of imposters, those peeping toms of dreams who subject their helpless followers to horrible exercises and tortures only to leave them in the end without a soul, and in the tatters of the subconscious.

Hypnos understood his task in a flash. Endymion had to be put into a state of hibernation: not so deep that he could not feel external stimuli, and he had to be maintained in this state for as long as possible. Hypnos was an anesthesiologist.

He explained to Zeus—for whom subtle scientific distinctions were foreign—that the mechanics of the sky would be restored to their usual accuracy by immobilizing Selene's lover on the mountain slope so she could continue meeting him at the same spot. The father of the gods was delighted. Selene was ecstatic. No one asked the patient his opinion.

This is what happened. The honeymoon and the following months passed like a dream, in undisturbed harmony, to the joy of both the universe and the lovers. Selene recovered her old equilibrium. She was only a bit more taciturn and pensive.

The fruit of Endymion's and Selene's love was an astronomical number of progeny: fifty girls and as many boys coming into the world regularly every moon-lit month.

And here a gap. Even more, a scandal, criminal negligence of the mythographers. No one knows what happened to the children. Human memory has not even transmitted their names. Yet we are justifiably concerned about the fate of creatures lightheartedly brought to life when we consider that their father was a great sleeper, and their mother roamed at night.

It is easy to imagine this lost centuriate, this abandoned flock—they go by twos, holding each other's hands, always frozen, always rough in the blue-gray uniforms of an orphanage, and with a flaw of injury on their pale faces. The destiny of such creatures is sterile hopelessness. The girls become servants for rich and vulgar bourgeois, and after a full day's drudgery fall asleep in narrow iron beds in a stuffy room without any window or hope. The boys, hungry, cursed and beaten, take any job, and if they are overcome by a moment of rebellion inevitably end in prison. Thus they go in their bluish-gray uniforms, one after another disappearing in a cloud of forgetfulness.

The whole story is full of shadows. What did Endymion feel, granted a luminous love and condemned to misty consciousness? Perhaps he even felt Selene's changes as she approached him: girlish, slender and trembling in the new moon, warm, maternal, insistent in the full moon. One thing is certain: he was attached.

Selene was truly in love. She would whisper magic incantations of love into Endymion's half-open mouth, and was answered by an echo. She was satisfied by the charm of perfect passivity, by the monologue of her own transports and lazy assent.

No one knows exactly when it happened. Selene stopped visiting Endymion. Not a single scene of parting, reproach, or tears. Nothing that shows profound passion: broken china, pumping out the stomach, or at least a slight neurosis. The worst of all possible finales: a sudden attack of strangeness. Like a doll fallen from a carriage, Endymion remains alone on the green slope of Mount Latmos. His open arms embrace no one. On his face, the smile of a country boy who got dead drunk before conscription into the army and fell asleep in the hay. A smile that is intellectually trivial and expressively vapid —simply foolish.

Even his smell that seduced Selene has left him. Now he smells of rain, damp feathers, and artificial sleep.

But he continues to be beautiful. That is, completely useless.

THE OLYMPIAN GENERAL

ARES WAS THE son of Zeus and Hera. He was one of the twelve Olympian gods, but it is not clear if this was because of an inexplicable worship of the number "twelve," or some other important reason. He was a second-rate god, auxiliary and generally despised.

The origin of his name was an adjective. Is it possible to imagine a more proletarian provenance?

On a fragment of a ceramic vase from Berlin, we see Ares sitting at the end of a table. He has a perfect resemblance to that unfortunate member of the Buddenbrooks family whose nerves were shorter on one side. Ares was the only neurasthenic among the Olympian gods.

Homer is not kind to him. In the *Iliad* he is a thoughtless fighter, more of a demon for battle. Homer endows him with two distinctive traits: strong legs and a powerful voice. He was unequaled in attack but also in flight. Injured by Diomedes, he screamed like ten thousand men.

The Greek gods were immortal but exposed to wounds, illnesses, and humiliations. Ares received mostly the latter. During the Rebellion of the Giants, he was knocked down by the terrible long-haired sons of Aloeus[1] and put in a bronze chest. After thirteen months he escaped, barely alive, his morale completely broken.

Ares killed the son of Poseidon but refused to admit the murder. He was, therefore, a liar, and this character trait is closely related to cowardice.

Heracles forced him to flee Olympus.

In military science Ares relied mostly on strategy, and the one principle he recognized was the furious attack, followed by an equally furious retreat. In this respect he resembles Napoleon. His opponent was the deliberate Athena, a superb strategist and tactician. She meticulously weighed the odds and never engaged in a chaotic brawl.

Ares would get involved in a war without any ideological motivation. He betrayed often and willingly. He preferred to kill with his own hands. This predilection indicates his barbarian origins. Only the young recruits loved him; they went to war deeply convinced it would be great fun, but never returned to confirm that delusion.

It has been rightly observed that many myths refer to Ares, which means that people liked to say bad things about him behind his back. But Ares had no cult; the temples in his name are rare and meager. Among the Greek gods who possessed academic training and social polish, Ares was indeed a barbarian.

This is how Herodotus described[2] the cult of Ares among the Scythians:

> In each district of the three kingdoms, Ares has his temple. It is of a peculiar kind and consists of an immense heap of brushwood, three furlongs each way, somewhat less in height.
>
> The heap is leveled off on top like a platform, accessible on one side but rising sheer on the other three.
>
> Every year a hundred and fifty wagonloads of sticks are added to the pile, to make up for constant settling caused by rains. In each district an ancient iron sword is planted on top of it, and this is the holy image of Ares.
>
> Annual sacrifices of horses and cattle are made to the sword, which indeed claims a greater number of victims than any other god. Prisoners of war are also sacrificed to Ares, but in this case the ceremony is different from that of the sacrifice of animals. One man is chosen out of every hundred; wine is poured on his head, and his throat cut over a bowl. The bowl is then carried to the platform

on top of the woodpile, and the blood poured over the sword.

While this goes on above another ceremony is enacted below, close to the holy spot. It consists of cutting off the right hands and arms of the prisoners who have been slaughtered, and tossing them into the air. When this is done and the rest of the ceremony is finished, the worshippers go away.

The victims' arms and hands are left to lie where they fall, separate from the trunks.

Later, when war became the domain of politics, shabby counselors, and cynical capitalists, Ares lost his standing. He was demoted. The apostle of chaos no longer had the wind in his sails; he aged. But still he made threats—that he was strong, that he could beat anyone in arm wrestling. He drank. He cursed as before.

In the unbearable quiet called peaceful coexistence, what is left for former generals to do? Conquests in bed. Like anyone who has been denied creative capabilities—or at least, industriousness—he contents himself with cheap eroticism. Tintoretto has represented it exquisitely in a painting, *Aphrodite and Ares Caught by Hephaistos*. Naked Aphrodite, a menacing Hephaistos, and Ares under the bed entangled with slippers and a urinal.

At present, Ares has discovered an overwhelming predilection for conspiracies, gangs, and terrorist organizations. His life up to now, and his modest education, have found an outlet in treacherous assassinations and the construction of primitive bombs.

At this moment he is sitting at the terrace of a café, overlooking a quiet city.

He looks at his watch. He pretends to be calm.

Exactly at the designated time, a huge, disgusting rose blossoms in the center of the city. It lasts for a moment. Then

one hears commotion and the howling of sirens. Over the spot —the place of execution of innocent people—a black curtain of smoke rises into the air.

Never again will the city be as it was before the explosion.

Ares pays for his coffee, and slowly goes down the steps of infamy.

SECURITAS[1]

To Ryszard Przybylski

AT THE BEGINNING of the Empire the Romans introduced a new deity to their pantheon. It happened almost furtively, after hesitation and without any theological preparations.

Securitas—this is how she was called—was elevated to the altars and watched over the Emperor's security. But attaching her to a single person, though an important one, deprived the goddess of the indispensable trait of universality.

The sober Romans noticed a contradiction in the nature of the new goddess of Security that was difficult to disentangle, even a seed of conflict. A guarantee of protection by the supernatural powers might lead the Emperor into a state of exaggerated self-confidence, pride, and arrogance. As a rule this is disastrous for the security of the citizens.

A compromise had to be invented. The Romans decided to put another, parallel Securitas for citizens in the heavens. But there were more complications: they had to decide whether it would be one deity with two protective branches, or two separate deities with different spheres of power. If there were two separate deities, what would be their relationship? Hierarchy and division of competence are matters of fundamental importance in any administration, including the heavenly one.

The appearance of the new goddess provoked passionate discussion and a split in popular opinion. The advocates of strong power were delighted by the discovery of the new deity.

They thought it was necessary, timely, and at last purely Roman—it put an end to the shameful custom of copying decadent Hellenistic models. They loudly demanded an end to subtle religious disputes, so people's minds wouldn't be confused and their hearts could unite around the new cult.

The republicans—or rather their pitiful survivors—declared they were decidedly (though timidly) in favor of one Securitas for all citizens. They argued that the Emperor was, after all, a citizen too, and it wouldn't hurt to remind him of this at every occasion.

Finally, the fortune-tellers and priests exercised the far-reaching restraint characteristic of conservatives. They limited themselves to elaborating a complicated document and sent it to the Senate. The Senate, in keeping with its tradition, could not reach a decision. It deliberated at length, exhaustively considered all the pros and cons, and after many months postponed answering the important question of one or two protectors of Security *sine die*[2]. No one noticed that on the heavenly field, only the Emperor's Securitas remained.

We do not know the face of Securitas, whether gentle or cruel. Nor do we know her intricate or simple symbols, the ritual, cult, even a single prayer or invocation of her followers. Securitas had the privilege of expressions that were unmarked and unrecorded, of unmeasurable values hovering between zero and infinity. Because of this quality Securitas could penetrate all things, and a moment of inattention was enough for her to become the tissue of our flesh, the backbone of a landscape with a rainbow, the natural order of things.

Only on coins, the oldest dating from the time of Nero, can we see her worn figure: a woman in a chiton holding a spear. Her banal posture and stately immobility are there only to lull our attention. On a small piece of metal it is difficult to express her essence: dog-like vigilance, and furious pursuit.

The victims of Securitas—more precisely, the half-eaten victims—avoided speaking about her. Why should they? The few who had the courage to make their revelations public met with disbelief and a sense of distaste. The conviction is very strong that the misfortune of another reduces, in a way

empties, the reservoir of bad fate—that another's bad luck protects us and increases our chances of survival. This salutary illusion always wins over the simple logic of facts. It will be this way forever.

It would be a mistake to think that the constant presence of the goddess was maintained by prophets, priestly councils, and the inspired. Securitas avoided pomp, ostentation, even publicity. She was severe, and content to have faceless executors.

What to call them? The problem appears insignificant but in fact is an important matter, an attempt to define what is the only material proof of the existence of the invisible Securitas. Popular tradition passed on dozens of euphemistic, funny, vulgar descriptions and a whole mine of anecdotes, but this surplus makes the choice difficult. So how should they be called? Functionaries—this sounds very general. Guards—this is full of pathos. Agents—too policelike. We select an emotionally neutral term: Attendants.

The Attendants wait in vain for their Proust. Great art is slow in paying them due justice or crowning their labors. These were countless. Rapt attention, speeding up or slowing down of the pace, sudden turns and pirouettes in a metropolitan ballet, floors, corridors, straining of memory, patient standing at street corners, empty hours in a café with a newspaper read many times over, fitting proofs of guilt together from overheard whispers, bits and snatches of conversation, papers, even from the flies on the ceiling. But these were not reflected, with a hundredfold echo, in any long *roman fleuve*, figurative painting, or opera.

The struggle of the Attendants. Not an obvious one against the enemies of security but a spiritual one, brushing asceticism and even self-abnegation. An inhuman effort of will to erase personal traits, to discard one's own physiognomy—on which the profession left its stamp like smallpox—and to achieve the pure face of a passerby. Only at the moment of attack and boarding, which consists in a delicate or brutal nudge, apologies, entering a conversation about some supposed common acquaintance, vacations in the mountains,

participation in an illegal organization—only then will an experienced eye notice how the good-natured face melts away, and the frozen, real face of the Attendant is peering out from under the water. This is all prehistory. In the beginning idyllic, clumsy and awkward, the Attendants move with the spirit of the times and advances in science, carried by the high wave of electronics.

The sadness of the Attendants. Securitas does not lavish warmth on them. Those who have given their entire lives to her ought to abandon any hope of reward. She is a cold and technical goddess whose *potestas* relies on the laws of nature, not the laws of man. Securitas has created a closed system, drawing energy from itself: the old dream of a *perpetuum mobile*. In this system she has introduced numerous bodies which, like planets, circle in marked orbits around a motionless center of power. Changing the system seems as impossible as changing the laws of gravity. The Attendants sense it, and at the same time know they are perfectly interchangeable. A single frown on the goddess's brow and they fall into non-existence. Despite this—or precisely because of this—they serve her faithfully. Indeed, there are many who prefer inexorable necessity to deceptive, dangerous freedom.

Researchers in mythology have devoted far too little attention to the goddess Securitas. Some have maintained she is only a pale personification, but they are profoundly mistaken. What other ancient deity has survived to our own times and enjoys such robust health? This fact alone should be an incentive for deeper studies and for scholarly reflection.

We know that each god ruled over a specific sphere of reality, had his own zealously guarded hunting district and favorite human game. The domain of Securitas is murky, determined by an unclear threat. Her entire inventiveness consists in devising ever-new dangers. She skillfully gives these out in doses, for she knows the art of gradation. Sometimes she is satisfied with a rioting suburb, then she embraces a frenzied city, wanders from one continent to another like the plague, captures land, water, air. Her borders are elastic. Who sets them? Most likely fear.

She does not need temples, sacrificial smoke, processions, or sacred orgies. She is satisfied with a profession of faith in our own miserable physiology. A flutter of the heart, sudden paralysis of the legs, cold sweat, shrieking in a dream—it is not us but our bodies that sing a daily antiphony to her glory.

Securitas belongs to the species of monsters. Compared to her, what are all these childish monster-giants, dragons, half-men and half-animals, hybrids haphazardly sewn together? Securitas is very much like us. She is a monster with a human face.

Like every deity, Securitas draws vital forces from our hopes and fears. She possesses a vast amount of psychological knowledge. She does not lavishly give away eternal youth because this is a charlatan's stock-in-trade. She does not promise other worlds, nor does she deceive us with notions of justice, because when all is said and done each of us—in the depths of the heart—counts only on a final act of mercy. Securitas puts us face to face with the cruel alternative: either security or freedom. TERTIUM NON DATUR[3].

In our harassed epoch Securitas can count on multitudes of followers. We value security, this lottery in which the winning number is just a stake in a game, a pitiful token that entitles the holder to continue the game as long as the hand continues to serve him.

Security, what is security? A faint-hearted formula for happiness. Life without struggle.

ATLAS

IT IS DIFFICULT, truly, to be reconciled to sky-high injustice.

Consider: The names of Achilles, Prometheus, and Heracles immediately evoke a spontaneous reaction. Because of the pen of Camus, Sisyphus became an allegory of our lives. But about Atlas, not a word. He does not speak to our hearts and minds. He is an exile from the imagination, an outcast of gods and of men. A remarkably small number of sculptures, frescoes, and poems have been devoted to him.

I think the main reason for this neglect is an immobility that is not very attractive; his frozen, silent suffering. Atlas's brother Prometheus, fastened to his rock, splendidly cursed the gods. The one possible action for those who are fettered is speech. Prometheus understood this very well: he moved the ether, and the ether carried the thunder of his curses.

Odysseus, Jason, Theseus, and so many other long-distance runners of mythology became the heroes of dramas. Never Atlas. It was Aristotle who closed the doors of art to him; in the *Poetics* Aristotle[1] remarked that there is no tragedy without action, although tragedy is still possible without personalities.

The whole character of Atlas, his entire being, is contained in the act of carrying. This has little pathos, and moreover it is quite common. The titan reminds us of poor people who are constantly wrestling with burdens. They carry chests, bundles, boxes on their backs, they push them, or drag them behind, all the way to mysterious caves, cellars, shacks, from which they come out after a moment even more loaded, and so on to infinity.

Atlas supports the heavenly firmament. This is his punishment, his curse and profession. No one is grateful to him for it. No one praises him, no one even encourages him. We have become used to it. This is how it should be. We say: someone must do it.

We don't know how he looks. Scholars have devoted so much attention to examining the internal life of the earthworm, the rat, the domestic goose; but they are silent when asked about Atlas's behavior. Does he ever shift his weight? Are his eyelids tightly clenched together? Is the sound from his chest a hoarse breathing, or a moan? Salty drops run down his face: sweat or tears?

Many maintain that Atlas is not distinguished by a lavish imagination, and most likely this deters people—there is nothing sensational. Because we know so little about him, let us state cautiously that cunning, a penchant for intrigue, the hatching of plots and coups d'état were not granted to him by nature. But can we reproach him for this? After all, the structure of the world is woven from contradictory elements that mutually support each other: evil and good, inertia and movement, intelligence and dullness.

What is he thinking? Men sentenced to heavy labor have neither the strength nor desire for thought. With great probability one can suppose that a plan like that of Samson never dawned in the head of Atlas. Samson was put in prison, waited for his sentence, and so had time to forge his revenge. Atlas does not have time. He has only eternity. Atlas endures. Some say, it is good this way.

He managed to free himself from the oppression of fate only once. The story is known, so we will tell it in a considerably abbreviated version.

It was like this: Heracles had to obtain a golden apple from the garden of the Hesperides for King Eurystheus. The garden was not far from the permanent station of Atlas; moreover, the Hesperides were his daughters. Complicated transactions depending on trust are best arranged within the family. Heracles promised to take the place of Atlas during his

absence, in exchange for friendly help in getting the desired fruit.

Atlas's journey to the garden of the Hesperides was certainly his most marvelous experience. He walked lightly—a winged column—through a world rid of the burden as if it was made of dew, of azure air, and light. He felt the wonderful weightlessness of all things. For the first time the accursed sky seemed ethereal, distant, and indeed beautiful.

When he returned to Heracles, intoxicated and happy, he naively offered to take the apple to Eurystheus himself. The cunning hero agreed. He asked Atlas to hold the vault only for a moment because he had to shift the pillow on top of his head. It was done—and at this point the unscrupulous hero left the titan. Everything returned to the old cosmic order.

The whole story is not very edifying morally, and socially it is even distasteful. No one knows why it is told to children. Also, it is difficult to understand why the hero of the beautiful metope at Olympia, "Atlas Bringing the Apple of the Hesperides," is the deceitful Heracles, the one who is guilty. He is represented as a handsome man and an athlete, while Atlas, on the other hand, is shown as a rather rough-hewn, clumsy hulk. Implacable time has damaged the metope, and the figure of Atlas has suffered the most.

Later the motif was taken up by generations of architects, and in the temples of Agrigentum[2], Atlas was given the subordinate role of a cantilever—a male caryatid. His mythological dimension was reduced. Once again he was treated unjustly—it was forgotten, it seems, that supporting the heavens is something completely different from serving as an ornament of a façade. He was given the ambiguous, abject function of holding up balconies and stairs in the palaces of lazy aristocrats and wealthy parvenus, not to mention banks, police headquarters, and ministries of public cruelty.

His solitude is desertlike. Neither day nor night brings him relief. Like all those who fulfill an unattractive duty for a long time, he is beyond the limits of our compassion and understanding. The only companion to Atlas is his burden.

It is not even certain if he would be happy to learn that in a recently discovered Hittite epic, a distant cousin has been found with the sonorous name of Upellura[3]. He, too, carries. This may be verified in reports of the Austrian Academy of Sciences. Unfortunately, these appear in very limited editions and are not intended for manual laborers.

Gods, titans, heroes—O what a fascinating and rich gallery of psychological deviations! Their world swarms with monomaniacs, paranoiacs, melancholics, schizophrenics, not to mention such gentle deviations as alcoholics and erotomaniacs. Against this colorful background, Atlas appears as a faintly etched figure. He is the catatonic of mythology. A catatonic, and a porter.

And yet I think he deserves a better place in human memory. Nor am I certain that he was justly refused the status of a symbol. After all, Atlas represents a very large part of humanity. With minimum good will on our part, and with imagination, he could become the patron of those who are terminally ill, patron of those condemned to life in prison, those who are hungry from birth to death, the humiliated, all those who are deprived of rights, whose only virtue is mute, helpless, and immovable—up to a point—anger.

PROMETHEUS

A WASTE LAND. HERMES to Prometheus:

"Now you see why it all ended up like this. You were too impatient, Prometheus." When he says this, the air is filled with the condemned man's cry. Hermes allows it—so that the dialogue can be harmonious and fluent.

"So now you understand. You should have carried out your plan gradually, slowly, one five-year-plan after another, from time immemorial to time immemorial. Initiating ever new circles of humankind, so that if it was ever exposed, it would be necessary to set up a monstrous show trial to punish those guilty of stealing the gods' secret.

A cry from Prometheus.

"If the truth be told, the gods reconciled themselves easily with the theft of fire. It was quickly degraded and chased into the kitchen. All it could achieve was to heat a pot. So it wasn't the heavenly fire that consumed cities. By now everyone has forgotten that the gods' ire was provoked by Prometheus' theft of memory."

A cry. The dialogue continues.

"And from memory, conscience is born," Hermes goes on, drawing out the vowels as if the word itself was delectable, "at first inconspicuous, it grows like fire and envelops the entire soul at moments of trial. Once awakened, it cannot be extinguished. It's what makes Orestes wander the roads seeking forgiveness. That's what you have made of man. The gods have no conscience."

A cry from Prometheus.

Hermes departs. He has never come to know the charms of conscience, either.

OLD PROMETHEUS[1]

HE IS WRITING his memoirs. In them he tries to explain the position of the hero in a system of necessity, to reconcile the mutually contradictory concepts of existence and fate.

The fire is crackling cheerfully in the hearth; in the kitchen his wife is bustling—a gushy girl who couldn't bear him a son but consoles herself that she will enter history anyway. Preparations are underway for a dinner to which the local priest has been invited as well as the pharmacist who is now Prometheus's closest friend.

The fire crackles in the hearth. On the wall, a stuffed eagle and a letter of gratitude from a tyrant of the Caucasus, who succeeded in burning a rebel city thanks to Prometheus's invention.

Prometheus chuckles to himself. This is now his only way of expressing his quarrel with the world.

ARACHNE

ARACHNE WAS THE daughter of a paint merchant in one of the cities of Ionia. She studied in the weaving department of the Divine Academy of Fine Arts in Athens, where she graduated summa cum laude and was told she would have a dazzling career. Who could have guessed that this forecast would be fulfilled in such a catastrophic fashion. The status quo is a fragile tissue.

Even more so, however, in Arachne's imprudent head. Her father quite understandably kindled her fame for the sake of advertising, so that both of them strode together across the scrap of Ionian land torn apart by barbarians, as if passing through time in a cloud of Melian white, Synopian ocher, Sorrento blue, and Tintoretto green, as yet unrealized, it is true, but already intuited.

Her unabashed and excessively loud renown reached the ears of Athens' patroness of the arts, who demanded that there be a competition. In an altered aspect she appeared in Arachne's studio. They were both to weave a veil with a name that sounded banal but turned out to be deceptive. Arachne was unaware of the strategem and showed a juicy piece of work, representing the erotic life of the gods. Her knowledge of erotic figures and other details of the gods she portrayed was truly rich and unsettlingly bold.

Athena, sensitive to the curious relation between art and truth, did not want art to conflict with manners. She violently rejected those daring scenes, ripped out Arachne's weaving—and it is said the bold artist hanged herself on the yarn. According to another version, Athena transformed Arachne into a spider.

Diego Velázquez de Silva was an artist who in incomparable fashion reconciled the contradictory phases of art and life at court in his life; loyalty—and betrayal, heat—and cold. In his great canvas *Las Hilanderas*[1] we see the interior of the royal workshop of Saint Elizabeth, where young girls are spinning yarn. In the background there is a scene that may represent Athena's judgment of Arachne. It does not represent it, but removes it into a curious isolation.

And here strays the mystery of that extraordinary judgment: abstraction, death, geometry, a turning away from all the various and diverse forms of life.

THE HISTORY OF THE MINOTAUR[1]

THE TRUE HISTORY of the prince Minotaur is told in the yet undeciphered script Linear A. He was—despite later rumors—the authentic son of King Minos and Pasiphaë. The little boy was born healthy, but with an abnormally large head—which fortune-tellers read as a sign of his future wisdom. In fact with the years the Minotaur grew into a robust, slightly melancholy idiot. The king decided to give him up to be educated as a priest. But the priests explained that they couldn't accept the feeble-minded prince, for that might diminish the authority of religion, already undermined by the invention of the wheel.

Minos then brought in the engineer Daedalus, who was fashionable in Greece at the time as the creator of a popular branch of pedagogical architecture. And so the labyrinth arose. Its system of pathways, from elementary to more and more complicated, its variations in levels and rungs of abstraction, was supposed to train the Minotaur prince in the principles of correct thinking.

So the unhappy prince wandered along the pathways of induction and deduction, prodded by his preceptors, gazing blankly at ideological frescos. He didn't get them at all.

Having exhausted all his resources, King Minos resolved to get rid of this disgrace to the royal line. He brought in (again from Greece, which was known for its able men) the ace killer Theseus. And Theseus killed the Minotaur. On this point myth and history agree.

Through the labyrinth—now a useless primer—Theseus makes his way back carrying the big, bloody head of the Minotaur with its goggling eyes, in which for the first time

wisdom had begun to sprout, of a kind ordinarily attributed to experience.

ACHILLES. PENTHESILEA[1]

WHEN ACHILLES PIERCED Penthesilea's breast with his short sword, he twisted it—as is proper—three times in the wound, and saw—in a sudden exaltation—that the queen of the Amazons was beautiful.

He laid her carefully on the sand, took off her heavy helmet, shook her hair loose, and delicately laid her hands on her chest. However, he did not have the courage to close her eyes.

He looked at her once more with a valedictory gaze and, as if compelled by a strange force, began to weep—as neither he himself nor any other hero of that war had ever wept—with a voice subdued and incantatory, low-pitched and helpless, resounding with lamentation and a cadence of remorse unknown to the son of Thetis. The vowels of that lament fell on Penthesilea's neck, breast, and knees like leaves and wrapped themselves around her cooling body.

She herself was preparing for the Eternal Hunt in forests beyond. Her eyes not yet closed looked from far off at the victor with stubborn, clear blue—loathing.

HECUBA[1]

TIME—IN EVERY DECENT epic story it stands aside like a valet, beyond people and beyond objects. Only catastrophes make it leap up from a place, then all of a sudden it forces its way inside with all its destructive power—it breaks, tramples, changes everything to ruins.

Here is Troy—burning briskly in the crash of collapsing roofs. The time of fire: fast, like wind out of breath, the color of black and red roses. One can hardly hear the moans of the defeated and the victors' shouts.

In the foreground sits desperate Hecuba. A Greek thug has thrown the bloody corpse of her small grandson[2] onto her lap.

Now we expect the cloak binding sky and earth together to be torn by a voice so powerful that—for a moment—everything stands motionless. But there is no voice, just excruciating silence.

Hecuba tears her peplos to shreds, and with tender carefulness her long, agile fingers wrap the little body in bandages, so no blood can be seen, nothing to cause dread. She whispers the name of the boy as she does it, and the whisper, of three repeated syllables, is like a lullaby.

Her rough skin of an old woman has locked itself tightly shut, and she returns to the remote time of childhood, that time of miracles when it is possible to bring every inanimate object to life.

In a moment the slaughterers will come to Hecuba and remove her toy from her hands. Then the kind-hearted gods will transform her into a dog, a bitch, because only the great

heart of an animal can contain so much misfortune. Then to find consolation she will throw herself into the sea.

PHYA[1]

EVERYTHING HAPPENED SO suddenly that in sacred legend Phya was irrevocably the girl kidnapped and taken to heaven in full daylight.

This happened without any visible cause, at least for the inhabitants of the part of Attica where there were vineyards, and sheep were pastured—this was Phya's melancholy chore, in the bright sunlight and the shade gently shifting as on a sundial, which did not exist at that time.

One day some riders on lathered horses arrived at her parents' fence. A short while later they vanished as quickly as they'd appeared, taking Phya with them. From beginning to end, the heroine of the situation was entirely unaware of what was going on around her. Which was quite a lot.

Taken to a barracks built near the city walls she had no time to cool off, before she was dressed in a gold-embroidered white robe and put on a chariot. In her right hand she held the reins, in her left, a lightning flash ending in a glittering knife edge.

The team drove out into the streets of Athens. It proceeded silently amid thickening crowds, from which cries of enthusiasm and hostility could be heard. The name of Pisistratus was shouted.

Escorted by pages, the team moved slowly. It turned into the street where pan-Athenian processions[2] were moving along.

And here the first stone hit it.

SACRIFICE

STAINED TABLECLOTHS, TRACES of cigarettes around the small plates on the conference table of Olympus, unchanged napkins, wilting flowers in crystal vases, and a monotonous menu, a poor choice of wine—that in itself bore witness to the gods' profound crisis. Gods didn't turn up or willfully left the conferences, they partook of the gods' gifts unaesthetically (and against the rules), they slept at the table or emitted loud bodily noises. The fate of the world was slipping out of their hands.

Zeus met with Hermes *tête à tête* more often than usual.

"We could have foreseen such an end of the world," Zeus said to Hermes, "we're not immortal, *hélas*, but the way this is proceeding is abominable in form; it's shocking. We will leave nothing behind, not even a fond memory. But not everything in our time was bad—we have to do something about it," Zeus said to Hermes.

Hermes' advice is to choose one of the gods as a sacrifice and to have him sacrificed by people. A little sophistry. After all, it's a way of animating people that many religions employ. Until now it hasn't worked, but we can try again. It would be as if God barged into a philosophy professor's lecture, say, the lectures of an atheist. We aren't running any risk, in the end. The curtain separating the worlds—supernatural and earthly—has long been riddled with holes.

With curious ease, Dionysus agreed, as an experiment at any rate, to risk the role of sacrifice. He explained that life had long ago lost its charm and meaning for him, and besides, he suffered from migraines and alcohol addiction, which made it very difficult for him to fulfill his responsibilities. The whole

thing looked—and indeed was in execution—quick and painless.

But was it really painless? Zeus harbored slight doubts.

“So, tell me exactly how it went,” Hermes asked.

“Well, it all took place without any force or unpleasant, petty scenes.”

“Did Dionysus suffer?” Zeus asked naively.

“Not only did he suffer. He wept. And called God to witness.”

III

TEN PATHS OF VIRTUE

1. 1. One should not appeal to the Gods for help even in extreme cases, for at the time they may be otherwise occupied, and our importunity may provoke an adverse outcome. Besides, it is doubtful whether any human communiqué can reach their ears, because of avalanches and explosions of decibels, not to mention magnetic storms.
2. 2. One should love the Gods, for it purifies the heart.
3. 3. There are many indications that reverence for one's parents, care for the poor, the elderly, and orphans, and loving care of animals are pleasing to the Immortals.
4. 4. Praying may be done everywhere. The worst place is a house of worship. They're too stuffy.
5. 5. Do not kill. Try to think well of people, lending them various virtues from time to time. Restrain from backbiting, which is the most despicable form of assassination.
6. 6. In sensual love, avoid excess, but also unnecessary scruples. A pair of happy lovers is better and more natural than a convoluted relationship between delicate neurasthenics. Especially the version with children, who have to watch the melancholy spectacle of their progenitors' daily torments.

7. 7. Try to be happy, for only such people can make others happy.
8. 8. One may steal in a period in which it is required for bare survival. One shouldn’t make an ideology out of it.
9. 9. Avoid ideologies that promise the ultimate liberation of mankind. Endowed with a particle of freedom, we ought on the contrary to limit it for the good of our neighbor.
10. 10. There are only spiritual sins. The sins of the flesh carry their own punishment with them: the progressive paralysis of lechers, the enlarged hearts of lighthearted gluttons, the splayfeet of informers.

IV *From* THE KING OF THE ANTS CYCLE *(unfinished or abandoned)*

ANTI-EPIC

THIS IS HOW it was in the beginning.

The story told by the caveman Homer to sweaty listeners clad in animal hides moaning in terror and delight, was short, true, and final. May those three adjectives stand as the sad testimony to my helplessness, my complete inability to know the source. Told in one breath, it contained everything that can honestly be said about the gods, the world of objects, and the nature of man. And also about a beginning out of chaos, a fragile harmony, and death in chaos. A few hoarse lines of verse, a harsh formula of fate. That's all. It should be the end of oral, descriptive, personal, erotic, heroic, choral, and philosophical poetry. All poetry.

Human memory is frail. No one is capable of repeating a masterpiece. No one is capable of repeating anything. Particularly as it was barely a sign, the first and last letter of the alphabet, a masterpiece of concision. It did not consist of elements, exchangeable parts, it was itself an element, a particle of proto-history. And from this crippled memory, from this fatal oblivion, literature was born.

To soothe their bad consciences, people began to make epics, first modest ones, a few syllables long, still haunted in the heart of the matter by an echo of the caveman Homer. Later, conscience fell silent. Some puffed-up fellow[1] came up with the principle of mimesis.

So writing became increasingly untrammelled, expansive, nebulous, ingratiating itself with nature. Loading on the creaky wagons of art everything that the course of history and human ingenuity brought to it: new gods, machines of death, statues of tyrants, venerated statues and products, hopes, and the monsters of consciousness.

Honest people knew of the existence of the proto-poem and that it was out of reach and impossible to capture, that it distanced itself with the speed of light. They therefore drowned their despair in floods of speech, in artificial illuminations, metastases of style—and let us say it finally—in pretentious babble. The noblest souls chose to open their veins, to keep a suicidal silence. The last tribute paid to the master poet.

The mirror traveling the road is a miserable instrument of cognition, and a clumsy instrument to boot.

…….

fermentation of images

in the end a daredevil was found,

who described clouds

THE GARDEN OF THE HESPERIDES

To Karin Kiwus

IN THE FAR West there is a garden laid out in a sea peaceful as arable fields. The Island of the Hesperides who guard the golden apple.

The sun above them, a moon like a fruit, curious stars.

A sleepy stream crosses the island—Lato, which renews the virginity of the Hesperides when they bathe in it.

Here we also find Lado, a petrified snake with a hundred heads. He speaks every language, including the language of mole, deer, and clover.

The Hesperides sing:

How many happy months are there in a year?

Twelve happy months.

How many fragrant nights are there in a year?

Three hundred, as there are three hundred moons.

In the evening the Hesperides rest by the sea, which leaves the imprints of its breaths and sighs on the sand.

Three sisters abandon themselves to the ritual of sensual indolence.

They wax Rubensian in the sun.

POSEIDON'S RETINUE

For Zbigniew Bieńkowski

OF COURSE IT'S quite different from the fancies portrayed by that Swiss painter[1] with a brewer's imagination and the sweaty hands of a bathhouse attendant.

O poor Poseidon! What have we to do with that group portrait of naked bodies splashing around in warm, shallow water? The god, Nereids and Tritons are taking a bath. They show their fat thighs, calfs, heels, torsos. Instead of mythical splendor, oceanic infinitude—a bourgeois *Sitzbad*[2].

In a moment they'll come up on the beach, disappear into bath cabins (with hearts cut in the doors) and return in piquant costumes to where snow-white cloths are spread out on the sand, with baskets of bread and butter, roast chicken, and bottles of wine.

Smacking noises. Broken-off conversations. Somnolence.

I NEVER PRAYED FOR relief in suffering, for the smile of fortune or an easy death. I prayed with the ardor of a child, the stubbornness of an old man, that I might see the Retinue once in my life. And grace was bestowed upon me, when on the spine of an enormous wave, in a dazzling mane, briefly, between the batting of an eye and nothingness, I glimpsed Poseidon, and the Nereids, and Triton, and it was all as unfathomable as a mosaic of white drops on a white background, as a dolphin's wedding feast—especially on that

memorable Wednesday when a storm was gathering in the West.

PEGASUS

PEGASUS IS A creature beautiful beyond description, virtually perfect, wild, which is to say untamed, unbridled, free, sovereign—truly majestic, but never frozen in the pose of dim-witted leaders.

For centuries it was thought that he was the product of poets' imaginations. This is an unforgivable error, more—an injury that must finally be redressed.

For whole millennia, nameless generations of horses bearing inhuman burdens and fat emperors, fed on the whip, fettered, slaughtered in senseless wars, tormented in hippic games—dreamed of a higher and sacred being—a winged divinity. He was a paradigm.

Ah, from time to time they were thrown some scraps of recognition or gratitude. Alexander named a city after Bucephalus. After his death he gave him a state funeral—and walking behind the mortal remains of his comrade he wept bitterly (which he did often, by the way). Caligula on the other hand appointed Incitatus a consul. Not to honor the horse but to humiliate the consuls. Numerous sculptors portrayed condottieri and cruel generals on horseback—but the horses are nothing but an organic pedestal. Still the downtrodden spirit of the horse labored without rest, in the quiet of stables, in the roar of battles.

Therefore it will not be an exaggeration to say that sacred Pegasus is a product of the collective imagination. Obviously not human, but equine.

It cannot be denied that he is of mixed race. This naturally provokes a hostile response from all fans of racial purity. But let us say it again and with emphasis: he is one of the most beautiful and exemplary cross-breeds of our planet. Perhaps only his medieval cousin the unicorn could compete with him in a contest of beauty, strength, and dignity.

Mythology is populated by genetically deranged monsters (rousing not our fear but our disgust) that could be born only in the mind of a drunken butcher blindly and randomly stitching a lion's head[1] to the trunk of a goat and the tail of a snake. It's truly unworthy, not to mention the aesthetic horror it constitutes. Scholars argue that semantics may be to blame here. First some uncertain word or vague source was found—and then a figure, name, symbol was made to match it and reconcile the contradictory elements. The Greeks, so sensitive to harmony, suffered the invasions of foreign tribes: Thracians, Persians, Asians, Egyptians, not to mention their own dark *Theogony.* And precisely for that reason Pegasus cuts a clear and harmonious figure against this background. He is truly not a bastard of the imagination. He is the embodiment of lofty flights, freedom, integrity.

Only once did someone manage to capture him. It was Bellerophon, with the decisive aid of the gods' technological tricks. It was no heroic act, but a simple stylistic procedure. Pegasus was deliberately turned into a flying horse. He was degraded to a means of transportation, a metaphor. I may expand on this in a treatise on Bellerophon.

It seems to me a real scandal that Pegasus was saddled by poets. In ancient times, neither Homer nor Horace would have dreamed of straddling Pegasus. This happened later, in times when mythology was treated frivolously, as an ornament, a crotchet—when inspiration was dying out and Pegasus was no more than a word—not an unbridled, internally independent being, having nothing in common with what is commonly called literature.

However, there is one detail which may justify the claims of the poets. It is known that by striking his hoof Pegasus created the spring Hippocrene, at the foot of Helicon, the seat of the Muses. But this only means that everyone can drink from the spring: wanderers, oxen—and poets, too, under the condition that they return to the spring, that is to the beginning. There are few of them, and they don't swim with the stream, which carries with it toppled ideologies, smashed icons and—garbage.

Apart from that, there is nothing, truly nothing that would permit Pegasus to be dragged down to earth, especially for a purpose as ambiguous as writing.

Epiphanies have to have some meaning, after all.

If one regards the matter pedantically, as the Germans do, expertly, from the angle of *Literaturwissenschaft*[2]—it is Matteo Maria Boiardo[3] who is to blame. In his unfinished courtly epic *Orlando innamorato* he used Pegasus as an infallible means of communication. One must do him justice. He took in vast regions and moved across an extensive terrain in time and space—from the *Song of Roland* to the Arthurian cycle and the courtly poetry of the Renaissance—not to mention private passions, or love, to which he wished to lend astral dimensions. I have the impression that he had no bad intentions.

Naturally, he couldn't have imagined that Pegasus would become the favorite quadruped of the literati. That he would endow hacks with a crumb of personal dignity. Shackled to their stools, they multiply their tedious verse and useless romances, miserably paid, barely tolerated by their environment—and they feel they are astride a venerable steed. What a delusion! Hackney cabbies have more dignity.

The old mare metaphor was put out to pasture, they thought she was no longer good for anything. This was not done without great losses in the sphere of poetics, which does not at all mean playing the poet, but craft. In a shipwrecked world, nothing can be compared to anything else. That's why, the innovators think, one must multiply the tautologies (the spiritual self-sufficiency) of egotists. Ego + Ego= Ego. E + E

= E. And then the world is perfectly futile, that is, coherent—consistent.

Pegasus is lonely and one of a kind.

Poor Pegasus! You are indifferent to all this. You are an immortal horse. You freed yourself from the yoke of the pretenders who claim you. You know very well that people are always trying to hitch the divinities—good and evil ones—to their carts, to get them to pull those silly carts down to forbidden dives.

For now, if nothing changes substantially, stay where you are.

Pegasus should be left in his place.

In August nights, near the constellation of Andromeda, his immaculate hide shimmers.

DRAGON

SOMETIMES I REALIZE that I am very old. Being old is not only having arthritis, but above all belonging to a world of concepts not understood by the present day, as if one had a different dog-eared dictionary, published long ago, a different old atlas, a different book of the world. No one believes, for example, that I had a nanny, like Odysseus. The king of Ithaka and I had nannies. Once upon a time it was a powerful institution.

One of the important responsibilities of a nanny was putting children to sleep. A very few, the laziest and most slovenly ones, sang silly songs in a monotonous voice, with endless refrains, demonstrating what Professor Schultz of Berlin called autogenous training, as most often they fell asleep before their patients (to be precise, these attempts at putting children to sleep most often ended in the loud snoring of the nannies). The overwhelming majority told fairy-tales. In the beginning it was stories about flowers, little roses, lilies of the valley, daisies, industrious dwarfs (a perfidious representation of a working class deprived of class-consciousness), later about animals, the furry ones of course—bunnies, baby hares, and kittens (sweetness and goodness). The only accent of evil was the occasional appearance, in the background, of a death cap mushroom. Good children fell asleep after those first hypnotic measures. If, on the other hand, they still resisted, the nannies (one must add that they were not students of psychology, often not even students of the alphabet) set the machine of atrocities in motion. An escalation of horror followed, filled with skeletons, musty cellars, owls, hanged men, severed heads, graveyards, and devils. And then the little heads with their haloes of golden

locks fell onto the pillows, their eyes shut tight, for they would rather die than go on listening.

The peak of horror were the stories about dragons. I fought off sleep to catch the beloved finale. I liked dragons a lot. They aroused in me feelings of tenderness and brotherhood. I couldn't understand why they were killed so mercilessly. I dreamed that when I grew up I would free dragons from people.

I fell into a dreamy state and didn't want to sleep at all—just do battle. Because the reliable dragon ploy didn't work on me, I was marked as a bad child—and after that, consistently—a bad pupil, a bad youth, a bad citizen of the best state. And in the end I will be a bad-tempered old man (old men are usually called bad-tempered, not bad, because they can no longer hurt women in a manly way). I still have a little time left.

When I was ten years old, I went on a school trip to Kraków. We visited the Royal Palace. Not far from the Palace is the Dragon's Lair. Sadly, it has been empty for centuries—for as the legend goes, a clever (to me not very sympathetic) cobbler threw the dragon an eviscerated ram in whose insides he had stuffed tar and sulphur. It was the first bomb, still primitive, later perfected by the anarchists. The dragon naturally died of dyspepsia.

The legend further has it that every year, the dragon was offered a certain number of the loveliest virgins as a sacrifice. I have long speculated that this was a way of distracting society's attention from the fact that the ruler of Kraków—excitable, insatiable in his erotic fantasies—was taking the virginity of his subjects' daughters and then blaming the dragon for it all.

The dragon became a symbol of all human crime and injustice. And because he was a living symbol, he was killed. It is quite extraordinary that he lasted as long as he did. Stamped out like a heretical sect, like the Jews, like all those who are other, who think differently.

In the beginning, or rather in *Genesis*, he was an ordinary snake.

GIANTS[1]

GREETINGS TO YOU, Giants. Across thousands of years of silence, across an ocean of human oblivion, across the rejection and hatred whispered [hissed] at you by the usurpers, those of took the title of Olympians, a dynasty boasting of the cunning of small animals, a corrupt generation, petty as the… of a guide, a generation devoid of dignity, a generation that knew…

I greet you, who…

The whole so-called gigantomachy was invented by the Olympians' hireling court poets, those shrewd poetasters, a revolting tribe that will go on for centuries conceiving its odes and epics in honor of any tailor who became a prince…

I greet you, Giants, who never wore a human mask and whose names are pronounced correctly only by mountain goats, eagles and the delicate voice of water falls, the whisper of stone avalanches. Remain remote, alien, fossilized [the only attitude worthy of gods] like a of red sky, the inexpressible beauty of a nest of amethyst, chilly as early dawn on the seashore Andromeda's pupil…

Greetings, Giants, you who were disowned by human…and its cowardly Olympian gods

A great blood-shot eye

Farewell, ancient time of Giants, faded tapestry, banner

INTRODUCTION TO “ATLAS”

(Autobiographical Note)

MYTHOLOGY AS IT was taught in school filled him with disgust, for it was the triumph of an anthropomorphic beast

—he collected fossils, claw prints

—he hated the race of victors and his covenant with the vanquished seemed to him an inheritance

from the mountain, the stream, the hunted insect, and the melancholy giant

—all his sympathy was directed toward

weary and ambiguous heroes

He guessed at the hell of immortality, the flames that do not consume, the desert plateaus, the never-ending incantations

They (the gods)

grant us a generous and thoughtless indifference, not understanding that we wait for punishment—as we do for grace

—he loved the monster and the injured man

he loved the injured man

→was the knowledge of monsters for him not propadeutical to history?

Annex (variants)

NARCISSUS

THIS MYTH LAY dormant in me for decades on end, lay there but didn't grow, didn't unfold like a baby's fist around a motionless rattle.

For what can one say about Narcissus? That he existed, that he was beautiful, that he stared at his own reflection in a pool and, ravished by beauty, drowned. Where is the lofty message, the envoy, the moral? He's gawking at the water and suddenly —plash. Just right for a modish haiku, such as a certain classicist has commended for years to rein in the garrulity of our native poets. In fact the myth was unbearably static. It lay there.

Nevertheless, attempts were made to resuscitate Narcissus. A bent was invented for him, an erotic bent of course. A forest nymph, Echo, fell in love with Narcissus. For reasons unknown, Narcissus rejected her love and in her sorrow Echo became the divinity of forest retreats. Her name suited excursions of fat city dwellers. And thus the nymph became a stewardess of nature.

Evidently Narcissus lacked the character profile or the germ of tragic guilt, for us to treat him seriously and follow his fate with compassion or outrage. At most he can explain the name of a flower, a seductive flower of course—but the rose, who has no chevalier or troubadour of its own, as we know, does without myths.

And what happened first? Probably delight in a new natural phenomenon, the search for a name, and then an attempt to adapt the story, without which it existed anyway, and therefore the story was arbitrary and meaningless, unnecessary. That is how Narcissus became the emblem of tautology.

Such a fate had to befall Narcissus, whose only virtue was in his looks.

SACRIFICE—DIONYSUS

1

“WE’RE GROWING OLD, DIONYSUS,” said the father of the gods.

“No doubt about it,” Dionysus replied, more seriously than ever and disinclined to argue. “But even stones grow old,” he added, though even to him the comparison seemed a little pointless.

“We age faster than stones—and in worse style. The worst thing is that we realize it ourselves. Some idiot from Ionia[1] said six centuries ago that we didn’t exist, and at that time we were in top form. I could have sworn that I threw thunderbolts and could actually kill an unbeliever or make a city go up in flames.”

“So—the world as will and representation,” Dionysus added sententiously, anticipating the development of philosophy. The gods had no sense of time. Time for them consisted of an unbroken chain of days and nights. Years, decades, centuries, seasons were without measurable form or value to them.

“It all started with Aphrodite getting that flu. We didn’t understand what a high temperature was, and that’s why she was coughing like an old fishwife.”

“It doesn’t matter how it started. One thing is important: people ceased to need us.”

“It’s our fault. We completely neglected the state of the priesthood. Nowadays they’re bodies of puffed-up ignoramuses, and the church treasuries are nothing but banks,

shady gambling halls, exchange bureaus, money laundrettes. And on top of that they all take bribes."

"It's true our intermediaries have lost their independence, which was predictable, but that's not the real cause of our downfall."

"What about the scandals on Olympus? That complete lack of basic decency. We started persecuting people without offering models of behavior. We didn't even come up with a decent decalogue, or at least a table of values."

"Oh, Dionysus, you're getting tedious and principled, like a young graduate of the Sorbonne. What you're talking about depends on man. We have to retain some kind of division of labor, that is, an elementary division and hierarchy. Who knows if…"

"I don't agree, Zeus," Dionysus burst out. "Since we took part in the war at Troy I see no real reason we should stand by in cowardly indifference and watch the tribal war of the Hutus and Tutsis…"

"Dionysus," said Zeus reprovingly, "when you start on politics, I lose my patience."

They walked on a long while, silent as stones, along the winding path at the bottom of a shady ravine that suddenly led up to the mountain and led to a pass, from which spread out, a view of the sea furrowed by the wind. The sun hung low on the horizon. Sunset was approaching.

"À propos," said Dionysus, and fell silent again. Nothing came to mind.

Another moment passed, and Zeus spake, cleaving his vowels, in a celebratory tone, a little too celebratory, particularly for such an inappropriate setting, as even the cicadas were silent. They were walking in the green shade amid a great silence.

"One of us has to die, so that the rest can live on."

"I don't quite understand, Zeus."

"One of us has to give his life."

“Forgive me, Zeus, but…”

“One of us must be sacrificed. Not to put too fine a point on it, one of us has to be put to death at the foot of an altar, like a sacrificial animal. Humankind will understand that we are prepared to do something for them.”

Silence.

Dionysus spake: “I understand you want me to be the sacrificial animal.”

Another silence. Only longer and deeper. You could hear their hearts racing.

Dionysus, in a calm voice, but not without a note of sadness:

“We both know we’re not immortal. Two hundred or three hundred years sooner or later doesn’t make much of a difference.” And after a moment of silence: “All right, Zeus, Dionysus consents to be an animal sacrifice.”

Zeus took a deep breath.

“I have to tell you I’m even curious about it. How a man feels. I’ll have a moment to enter a human being’s skin. I think that before the execution there will be some kind of priestly drivel, something like that.”

“I want to assure you,” said Zeus, “that the ceremony will be sublime and moving.”

“To hell with that,” Dionysus snorted.

Then he added: “So—when?”

“Soon,” said Zeus.

“They walked on to the highest point of the pass.

2

ON THE DAY OF Dionysus' sacrifice, Olympus was deserted. All the gods had come up with some incredibly important and urgent business to attend to. Apollo took off for Egypt. Athena had an important conference with Poseidon on the island of Thasos. Zeus took refuge in the woods of Epirus. The one remaining was Hermes, the most trustworthy of the gods, whose responsibilities moreover required him to accompany souls into the underworld.

"WHAT DO YOU THINK, Hermes, did he suffer?"

"Hard to say. At the beginning he behaved as if it were all a game, but later…"

"Did he scream?"

"Worse than that, Zeus. He wept."

LABYRINTH ON THE SEA

To Kasia

translated by

Alissa Valles

LABYRINTH ON THE SEA

I

> One of the great islands of the world[1]
> in midsea, in the winedark sea, is Krete:
> spacious and rich and populous, with ninety
> cities and a mingling of tongues…
> and one among their ninety towns is Knossos.
> Here lived King Minos whom great Zeus received
> every ninth year in private council…
>
> HOMER, *ODYSSEY*

THESEUS, THE SHIP THAT is supposed to take me to Crete, has not yet arrived at the port in Piraeus and no one can tell me when it will. Ordinary timetables do not hold good in the homeland of myths, in a country where the clocks measure millennia. Nothing is left me but a choice between a peasant's patience or a tour of the port's tavernas. And so I sit in Piraeus waiting for the ship without anything to do but look at faces. These are not the faces we know from ancient vases, nor—I imagine—bodies resembling Praxiteles' statues. The admixture of Albanian, Bulgarian, and Turkish features is striking and has wholly effaced the Hellenic physique a traveler expects to find here.

Was Herr Doktor Fallmerayer perhaps right to claim that the Slavic invasions of Greece, which started in the seventh

century A.D., completely altered the ethnic composition of its inhabitants?

And here I am reminded of an anecdote about Shelley. The great Romantic was working on his poem *Hellas* when his friend Trelawny proposed he come along to meet a real Greek. Together they went to Livorno to visit a Greek ship loaded with "a crowd that looked like Gypsies, yelling, gesturing, smoking, eating and playing cards like barbarians." And to top it off, the captain of that ship had left his homeland after becoming convinced that the war of independence was not in his interest.

I think one conclusion should be drawn from this anecdote: peoples have more important, more basic things to worry about than whether or not they resemble the ideals dreamt up by Romantic humanists.

After a wait of six hours, *Theseus* arrives at the quay. Crushed in the dense throng, with a bleating goat underfoot and enormous bundles overhead, I make my way on board. I will cross the lovely Aegean Sea on this jittery ship full of noise, filth, unbearable odors, and wonderful life.

Early in the morning I step out onto the upper deck of our ship. On the planks stained with tar and oil the bodies of men and women are strewn in disarray, as if some feast had ended in a slaughter. I am alone amid sleepy exhalations. I want to see Crete emerge from the sea.

High up, over the misty horizon, barely visible, something faint, an opacity of the sky, a gray mark taking on a shape, and then I see clearly a mountaintop suspended in the heights like in a Japanese landscape painting. It is inexpressibly beautiful, this piece of distant rock carried in the air by the mist. I go on watching as the mountain grows, descends slowly, majestically, as if down a staircase, until a mountain chain settles on the sea before my eyes, filling the horizon.

And there is the island.

This is how Crete began for me, from the heavens, like a deity.

Heraklion. A Venetian port and its walls, bastions surrounding a city of white houses. The silence of closed shutters.

I walk into town on an uphill road that seems to go on forever, though the evidence of one's eyes refutes it. The dimensions of light have frozen and though I hear the crunch of gravel under my feet and the sound of my own steps, I seem not to be moving at all, sunk up to my neck in the heat, drowned in the glare. I begin to suffer a painful loss of reality. I see now as if in a dream, askance, unable to communicate with my body, moving like a pendulum—motionless, bound to blank space, fixed once and for all as if on a photograph, caught in the trap of appearances, with a heavy shadow on my back. I will be haunted for many years by this image and the memory of the walk up steep Handakos Street, an image of being fettered, as if death had just then touched me for the first time, in the blinding midday sun.

I rented a white room with an iron bed above which hung a terrifying Saint George killing a dragon, and rushed to the museum without delay, to surround myself with objects, many objects, in the hope that I would forget that shameful episode and the nauseating sense of being cast out of reality.

II

THE MUSEUM IN HERAKLION held a surprise in store for me, a surprise of the unpleasant kind such as I had never had in any museum or in the presence of any work of art. I was not then a youth thirsting for originality, which as we know is easiest to achieve if you are an iconoclast, if you scorn recognized works and don't respect either authorities or tradition. This stance had always been alien to me—even odious, if I leave aside the short phase between my fourth and fifth year that psychologists describe as the phase of negativism. I always wanted to love, to adore, to fall to my knees and bow down before greatness, even if it overwhelms and terrifies, for what kind of greatness would it be that didn't overwhelm and terrify.

I remember well the day I entered the museum in Heraklion two hours before closing time, ran through (how naive!) the rooms on the ground level where there are ceramics, little statues of bronze, clay and earthenware, seals and jewelry, everything counted as minor or applied art and then, my heart beating fast, I went up to the next floor where my guidebook —the invaluable *Guide Bleu*—promised me the frescoes I knew from reproductions in innumerable histories of art, those praised by experts as masterpieces of ancient painting.

And? Nothing. I looked dully, without emotion or sympathy, at the *Dolphins* in the painted blue of the sea and at the *Prince among Lilies*. I quickly attributed this to my own indisposition, one way or another the sea journey on the battered *Theseus* had worn me out, I was stupefied by the heat of noon, and hungry, but not hungry enough to achieve heavenly ascension.

Above all—I tried to systematize my doubts—the frescoes' coloring was banal, suspiciously new and flat. The color combinations—the blatant poster-like tans, blues, and reds; in a pinch you could take them for Matisse (of a much inferior kind), if it were not for the slack lines, lines of which my drawing professor would have said they were uuhhh…not, as they should be, ooohhh; lines enclosing with a dull contour line planes painted in local paint. All of this without depth, without gravity or grace—leaving aside the little garden frescoes and the famous *Parisienne*.

I called knowledge to the aid of my failing sensitivities. I recalled what experts had said about Cretan painting. They had wisely said that this art showed evidence of eideitic vision like that of the palaeolithic frescoes in France and Spain and the art of Rhodesian bushmen.

It was possible, and even quite probable, that my instinctive resistance to the Minoan frescoes, my dissent, were due to my suddenly encountering something in no way reminiscent of the Egyptian, Etruscan, or Pompeian wall paintings I knew. For the painting of the Cretan artists appears in fact to be an art without analogue.

And so—I thought—Geerto Aeilko Snijder is probably right: the Cretans were eideitics. One can test this oddity of vision (universal in children) and thus of the world's representation by looking at the sun or a lit lamp and then shifting one's gaze to a bare wall: one sees a pulsing red silhouette of the lamp or the sun. This is approximately how an eideitic person perceives reality, and by this phenomenon, whether ability or deformity, Snijder attempted to explain the oddity of Cretan art: the astonishing facility with which it seizes forms in motion in one contour line, a facility accompanied by a certain weakness—as if the outline of the object had been wrung from a swooning hand—as well as a lack of bone, flesh, matter, structure (which Renaissance painting renders so wonderfully), that insubstantiality of people, animals, plants without roots, independent of the force of gravity—carried aloft in the air.

And so the frescoes displayed in the Heraklion museum did not speak to me. I began sniffing them like a dry bone, and I noticed without special effort that there were cracked bulges of indefinite color on the surfaces; they made up only a small part of the surface of the fresco and were, as I later discovered, the only fragments of the originals. From *Prince among Lilies* or the *King-Priest* only a piece of a thigh, a torso, a shoulder, and a plume survived. Everything else was reconstruction, guesswork, fantasy. It was as if someone had filled out found fragments of an ancient poem with his own words.

Later, when I was digging around in the literature on the subject, the whole question was cleared up for me. The wall paintings as they first appeared before the eyes of the archaeologists excavating the palace at Knossos were in very bad shape, covered with a layer of ash, and at the slightest touch they crumbled to dust. Leonard Cottrell in his book *The Bull of Minos* says that Sir Arthur Evans, the discoverer of Knossos, "quite rightly engaged the excellent Swiss painter M. Gilliéron, who had an extraordinary gift for patiently gathering together the small surviving fragments, recreating with sensitivity and precision what had been lost, and then producing an exact reproduction, which was placed on the wall in the place where the original had been."

I have never been able to find master Gilliéron's own works, or even any reference to the artist, but I suspect that Evans hired him not for the alleged talents listed by Cottrell but because he submitted to the discoverer's vision. I don't quite understand why the fantasias of a Swiss on the theme of Cretan frescoes feature in art history textbooks as originals.

In comparison to other objects of Cretan art found, the Minoan frescoes are few and come to us in a crippled state, burnt by fire, mutilated by the dubious endeavors of restorers. And although it was certainly an art inferior to Egyptian art, it bears the mark of an inimitable originality.

White, blue, gray, yellow, black, red, and green—this was the "palette" of the painters of Crete and of the Nile Delta. But the differences are more important than the similarities.

The Minoans painted on walls while they were still moist, while the Egyptians used the tempera method. These two techniques entail important consequences: the first requires speed, decisiveness, avoidance of detail, something like improvisation; the second allows for retouching, corrections, is more focused, slow and contemplative.

Probably more than any other art on earth, the painting of the Egyptians, their whole art, was under the powerful sway of metaphysics. But at the same time the most banal scenes from life—wild ducks among the reeds, carp in a pool—are painted with an almost scientific precision, and we have no difficulty distinguishing the species of animals and plants represented by the anonymous Egyptian masters. How to explain this unsettling *mésalliance* of naturalism with lofty matters of the spirit?

These detailed, idyllic Egyptian scenes are almost always accompanied by a sign, an inscription, a hieroglyph, which tells us that behind the colorful veil of life there exists one grave world of gods and souls seeking immortality. Realistic exactitude is not always an expression of a joyous affirmation of life, a praise of visible reality. A lotus blossom painted scrupulously as in a nature guide, a hand drawn with fine precision on the strings of a harp, the feather of a wild duck—do not signify either praise or affirmation. They are there so

we may read from those fragments the pure melancholy of transience.

In Cretan painting, there is less power and sublimity; it is devoid of philosophical reflection and religious ecstasy. It puts one in mind of the slight, frivolous Rococo. It is a spontaneous art, nervous, impetuous, caring little for detail, so that birds, fish, and flowers express what seems a general idea of nature and at times it is hard to say what species they belong to. But in all of this there is the refreshing breath of deified nature, grace, humor, and a dance-like movement.

The whole corpus of Minoan painting, almost everything that survived the conflagration, is in the modern, well-lit museum of Heraklion. The frescoes are on the second floor marked with the letter K. There are not many of them, 38 altogether, of various sizes, from miniatures whose height varies from 17 to 80 centimeters to great processional paintings which represent figures at something close to life size.

We know that painting in Crete was—at least during a certain period—very widespread and covered the walls of many palaces and villas. The Minoan artists painted what we would now call "abstract" decorative motifs, ornaments, buildings, columns, porticoes, stylized plants, as well as animals, people, landscapes taken from the surrounding world. The phrase "painted after nature" does not make much sense in relation to Cretan artists, they certainly did not set themselves any models to copy; they carried the models inside themselves, an inexhaustible store of forms and colors, they were a medium passing on the running stream of the colorful world. As if there were then no separation of object and subject, the artist did not stand facing nature and trying to fathom it with the aid of geometry, but was a part of the cosmos, like tree, water, and stone, a meeting-place of elements, and it would not have entered his mind to think he was a creator, an exceptional and inspired being.

Not many works of art have reached us in their full glory and splendor. One should be surprised (and it is a joyful astonishment) that so many testimonies to human sensitivity

and genius have survived. In the garden of art there is a big hospital of mutilated and dying forms. The powerful mill wheels of time work relentlessly. So wandering through the rooms of the museum in Heraklion as if through hospital wards I tried to discover in the old frescoes the beauty of youth. Like the sick, they expect our compassion and understanding. If we begrudge it them, they will depart, leaving us alone.

The *Blue Bird* was found in the so-called House of Frescoes in Knossos and is from around 1600 B.C., and thus from the Middle Minoan period. Chronologically it is one of the oldest preserved Cretan paintings.

From the dark brown patch of rock a blue bird emerges—painted summarily, as on a piece of folk pottery—probably sitting on a stone, with its neck extended, its head lifted, and with a yellow eye round as a bead. All this happens in unreal space, where three states of matter are continuously passing and transforming themselves—rock into water, water into air. And added to that, plants—groves of irises, reeds, the open buds of unknown flowers, flying in all directions like musical lines, like notes of landscape. The bird drinks water and listens to the song of the vegetation. The finders were delighted with this scene by the stream, a pretty picture, an idyll without mythological commentary, without evil spirits, a praise of eternal life wrested from death.

How different is the stucco relief found in the so-called Guard House at the northern entrance to the Knossos palace. Painted in dark, burnt red turning to brown—the portrait of a bull in profile. It is probably a hunting scene (like the one sculpted on a cup from Vaphio), if we judge from the tongue sticking out, the eyes half-closed with rage and the flared nostrils smelling the approaching enemy. The bull's body in motion, in full gallop, is a study of strength, a fugue of rage, which reminds one of the frescoes at Lascaux. In the delicate Cretan world this charging bull is an exceptional thing; it brings to mind the Romantics—Delacroix would probably have copied it with relish.

The *Dolphins*, the large fresco in a faded fallow blue shade found acknowledgment in the eyes of Nikolaos Platon, the *ephor* or director of the Heraklion museum, who was critical toward the restorational activities of Evans and his team. He stated that the restoration had been carried out correctly. I was not taken by this "group portrait" the colors are saccharine, the lines mannered, but one has to remember that the painting was separated from the architecture and its decorative meaning is difficult for us to grasp.

Here is the famous *Parisienne* (the titles come from Evans and like the names of the rooms he invented, betray his Romantic tastes)—the small portrait of a Cretan lady, reproduced myriad times, in which people have seen the influence of Egyptian art. Quite wrongly, for though it is true that the eye is enormous, Egyptian, the contour of the face painted in a thick line, the slightly upturned nose, the sensual lips, the expressive chin and hair, especially the hair, the extravagant hairdo with the bun in the neck and a coquettish lock over the brow, and the painterly treatment of the whole—all contrast with what we see in Egyptian frescoes outlined with a dry contour line. The portrait of this young woman has nothing in common with courtly stiffness—which you might expect here—but quite on the contrary is filled with a slightly arrogant charm.

The fresco called *Tauromachia* (severely damaged) was supposed to be the crown evidence that there were bloodless games on Crete in the Minoan period. Evans left a sketch explaining what the circus game portrayed in the painting was: the acrobat seized the galloping bull by the horns, bounced off them as if on a trampoline, landed on the animal's back and jumped off onto the shoulders of another acrobat. These alleged fantasy acrobatics, this true salto mortale, proves that the renowned archaeologist knew very little about bulls, since toreadors—the real specialists—agree that nobody could ever perform such a stunt. On the fresco the bull's body is extended in flight, multiplied unnaturally by speed, but in accordance with the tendencies of Cretan art, possessed by motion.

I was most touched by the small, miniature frescoes that derive from the late Minoan period, and which Evans entitled

The Ladies of the Court and *The Garden Party*. I think that it was in their miniatures that the Cretans reached their peak.

A crowd gathered around a sacred building (the columns are set in two rows, stylized bull's horns) watches what are probably the rituals of a cult. It is like in a great theater—the mood of an opera hall rather than a temple where there is to be an encounter with a terrible god and his stern deputies.

"A group of ladies with intricate hairdos, in colorful and very fashionable dress, sits merrily chatting, not paying attention to what is going on in front of them […]. We easily recognize ladies of the court in their elegant attire. They have just come from the hairdresser's; their hair is wound about their heads and shoulders, held by a ribbon that passes over the forehead and falls in a long band on their backs, amid strings of beads and jewels […], the sleeves of their dresses are puffed and tightly fastened, the bands and flounces of their skirts are closely reminiscent of today's fashion. The narrow neck bands suggest transparent blouses […], their nipples are visible […], which gives the effect of a low décolleté. The dresses are cheerily colorful, with ribbons in blue, red and yellow with white stripes, and some with red stripes.

One's attention is immediately drawn to the lively conversation between the third lady from the right (the one with a hair net) and the lady sitting next to her. The latter gives emphasis to what she is saying with an extended right arm, almost touching the thigh of her conversation partner, who herself raises her arms as if with the astonished cry: "Well, you don't say!" This scene of womanly confidences, gossip, and social scandal is very remote from the classical works of art across the ages; this vibrant genre style and Rococo mood transport us to the present age."

I have quoted Evans at length with a somewhat perfidious purpose. For this quotation is taken from his journalistic writings, not from his scientific works. The discoverer of Knossos was an excellent minister of propaganda for his own work, he had an agile pen, and the journalistic experience of his youth came in handy; his many popularizing articles for

the *Times* and other periodicals won throngs of admirers for the newly discovered civilization.

Evans knew very well that the layman is most easily moved by the statement: “but they were just like us, they loved the circus and jolly company, their women were like ours, the ones so beautifully painted by Whistler.” So Evans read into the frescoes, whose figures are no bigger than your pinkie, a very Victorian atmosphere, and this will to find in a remote civilization features close to his own age led him on to reconstructions and interpretations that were too risky.

The *Boy Gathering Saffron*—a small wall painting, found in the north-west part of the Knossos palace and restored by Gilliéron according to Evans’s indications. Later, a renowned expert on Minoan art, the aforementioned Nikolaos Platon, discovered that the body of this saffron-picker had an odd shape and was also painted in blue, a color never used in representations of human figures. Later other small fragments were found, the piece of a tail, a crocus, and finally a blue non-human head. And so the *Boy Gathering Saffron* became the *Monkey in the Palace Garden*.

The *Youth Carrying a Ryton* is a fragment of the reconstructed *Procession Fresco* found in the Knossos palace right at the beginning of the excavation work.

“Early in the morning,” Evans writes in his journal, “we removed the next layer in the corridor to the left of the *megaron* and discovered two large pieces of a Mycenean fresco.* One represented a head, the other a waist and part of a female figure (later found to be male) carrying in its hand a long Mycenean *ryton*, or long, conical dish used in funeral ceremonies. A life-size figure, painted in dark red, like the figures in Etruscan tombs and the Kefti** of Egyptian painting. The profile of the face is noble; full lips, the lower emphasized by a curved line. Dark eyes, almond-shaped eyelids. Beautifully molded shoulders […], without a doubt one of the most admirable human figures from the Mycenean age found so far.”

But this suggestive description fired no enthusiasm in me. The fresco is mortally wounded; its color of clotted blood is

peeling. Like the *Prince among Lilies*, also considered a masterpiece, a life-size man striding among stylized plants, drawn with a banal line. Here most of all you see the heavy hand of the conservationists; the few damaged fragments of the original were united into a whole with the aid of the unconvincing conjectures of Gilliéron, who threw some of his own butterflies and flowers in for good measure.

But just when I thought nothing in Minoan art would be able to move me, I stumbled on the sarcophagus from Hagia Triada and experienced a revelation. This is undoubtedly a masterpiece, next to which all the Cretan frescoes pale and fade. I drew near it with piety, walked around its four sides—and then the bell rang. The museum was closing. And again I had the fantasy of letting myself be locked in to spend the night and the morning alone without obsessive excursion groups, to learn by heart all its colors and lines, so that later when I would be far away I could close my eyes and summon the memory like a film—an image more precise than any reproduction.

I CALLED IT THE meat and fruit neighborhood. It lies in the center of Heraklion and life comes to a standstill here when the sun stands straight above the town; but it blossoms at dusk and in the long evening and night hours when a cool wind comes down from the mountains. The smell of blood, the sweet breath of bakeries, a sharp cloud of herbs. The fruits of gardens and fruits of the sea. And over it all the noise and racket of a Turkish bazaar. An appendage of Asia.

Little one-floor wooden houses with cheap restaurants. Simple wooden chairs, set out on the street, as they should be. First of all the waiter, not asking, brings a glass of cold water, which fills the whole body with the freshness of the spring. I order for a starter a plate of small fish fried whole, goat's cheese, olives and killer peppers, and the inevitable anise vodka—*ouzo*. Then the simplest dishes—Greek pizza, *moussaka*: eggplant, pureed potatoes and ground meat; this whole layer cake is baked at the hottest temperature. The bread

is white and sweet, with sesame seeds on the crust. White wine from the island of Samos, seasoned with resin as in the time of Homer. And then a huge piece of filo pastry. Greek cuisine is rustic and fulfills one's dreams of paradise, where everything should be sweet and rich.

I settle down across from a bloodbath. An athletic butcher is putting on a free show called "quartering an ox." The knife slips masterfully through hillocks of flesh, a cleaver cracks the bones, dividing this magnificent thing into its elements. With a single movement he removes the stomach and heart from the inside and throws them flat on the chopping board. I think of the critics who will busy themselves with us, who will torture what we leave behind, hacking and ripping blindly.

I think also of the abandoned sarcophagus, of the advantage of works of art over works of literature. The sarcophagus is equal to itself, effectively defends itself against interpretations, doesn't let the noisy and arrogant get anywhere near it, doesn't lend itself to being divided into first causes. It now rests in a glass case in the waxen stillness of the museum, alone with its mystery—a motionless procession of people and animals.

I went back the next day. I postponed my excursion to Phaestos. Nor did I go to the palace in Knossos, faithful to the principle that one must not greedily wolf down everything, that one should choose from among the mass of objects the best work, the sum of the others, and crown it, enthrone it, call it a masterpiece. For the sarcophagus from Hagia Triada is beyond all doubt a masterpiece—its maker seized and conveyed to us that happy moment of revelatory knowledge and inspired sobriety, when a civilization sees itself whole as if in a mirror, conscious of its boundaries, strength, and shape.

The sarcophagus was found, as I've said, in Hagia Triada, in a small vaulted tomb where the remains of persons belonging to the royal family were kept. Scholars date this royal crypt to the pre-palace period, so it would be something along the lines of a Saint-Denis of Cretan kings. But the sarcophagus itself derives from the later Minoan period.

It was made of limestone. It is not large. Its length is 137 centimeters and because I owe it many hours of happy

contemplation, I thought that it would be that sarcophagus I would carry from a fire, if I were suddenly in a position to express my gratitude to it for having restored my faith in the greatness of Cretan art. It is untouched by the hands of conservationists, and so it is the crown witness of the art of the Minoans. Its colors: tans, blues, red, emerald green, sandy yellow glow with a muted and noble radiance.

The torment of description. For I will have to describe the sarcophagus, and the description will be like any description, long, dull, like an inventory—the enumeration of figures and objects. I will not be able to avoid unwinding sentences like bandages, from left to right, against the rules of sight, which gives the whole in the clear and sudden light of simultaneous presence.

The first long side of the sarcophagus, from the left: three colorful bells of skirts, from which flat and bare Egyptian feet protrude. The rest is gone; the upper part of the mural was destroyed and is now a white wall of nonexistence. In the middle a stone table for sacrifice, upon which lies a fettered bull with its throat cut. Blood flows into a dish standing under the table. The animal's eyes are open wide and full of melancholy. Under the table two goats huddle, in the background a figure with braids waving playing a double flute. This is probably how we are led to the altar, before which the priestess stretches out her hands above the sacrificial dish; up above a basket of fruit floats against all laws of gravitation. On the very edge of the scene, the wall of an altar with stylized bull's horns and two double-edged scythes on thrones as high as columns. And then a tree, painted delicately and tenderly amid this ceremonial and almost mystical scene.

The other long side of the sarcophagus is as it were divided into two acts, two scenes, distinguished by differently colored backgrounds. On the left side, between thrones, two double-edged axes—labryses (birds have alighted on them), and a large crater. A woman dressed in a corset and leather skirt, pours the blood of the sacrificial beast into the crater. Behind what is presumably the priestess, a lady dressed in an indigo-purple gown, with a diadem on her head (a princess, according to some interpreters), carrying two pails on a bar that rests on

her shoulders. And finally, the last person in the ceremonial procession, a figure in a golden ankle-length gown, playing a large musical instrument reminiscent of a lyre. Thus ends the scene marked by a bright sand-colored background.

All figures are shown in profile. They are painted as if in one movement, without superfluous details or extravagant gestures. The color scale—blue, gold, brown. The prevailing vertical accents underline the monumental gravity and serenity of the scene.

Now the procession changes direction all of a sudden. Against a blue background, male figures (marked by the brown color of their faces, as distinct from the light complexions of the women). Two of them carry goats, and the third, closest to the edge of the scene, a model of a ship—a motif often found in Egyptian tomb paintings as well. The heavenly background breaks off and we now touch on the very heart of the scene, the mystery of mysteries, the mystical cause.

The outline of a building on three levels, behind it a tree that is read as a cypress. From the earth the hero of the drama emerges. He has the shape of a statue, a herm, wrapped tightly in a light-colored robe as in a cocoon, enigmatic as a specter, concrete as a stone. He has come back to earth one more time, lured by sacrifices, music, incantations—indifferent and sublime. It is to him that the sepulchral libations, the seduction of flutes and blood are dedicated.

The narrow sides of the sarcophagus show a chariot harnessed to two horses, led by two figures with battered diadems on their heads. On the other side, the same two figures (the dead accompanied by a deity, interpreters speculate), but the draft team is strange, two winged lions with the heads of birds—griffins. A bird has landed on their enormous, golden-blue wings, the sign of a deity’s presence.

The sarcophagus is not only a masterpiece, it is also the only surviving Minoan Book of the Dead—an exact portrayal of a funeral ritual; so it has the value of a document, a visual record of an ancient tradition. None of the figures portrayed has a decorative character, all play a certain role in the

ceremony represented. We easily find here all the great religious symbols of the Minoans: the double-sided axe, the *labrys*, from which we got our "labyrinth," the stylized bull's horns called votive horns, trees and birds, whose symbolic meaning is beyond any doubt, and also musical instruments—string instruments, accompanying the bloodless libations, and wind instruments, associated with animal sacrifices. The whole composition seems to follow the strict rules of a formalized liturgy.

The scholars have given us an array of more or less convincing interpretations of the paintings on the sarcophagus. Some see in it a ceremony connected to an agrarian cult—celebrating the return of spring; others think they see the mystical wedding of Zeus and Hera. Most persuasive are the readings that take the cult of the dead as their point of departure. The mourning ritual, sacrifices, and sacral gestures have a practical aim: to watch over the life of the deceased—since death and resurrection were a natural right like the laws of nature, the succession of the seasons, the falling of leaves, and the sprouting of grain.

The artist passed on to us something greater than the record of a cult. An untiring faith in immortality emanates from the sarcophagus paintings, the conviction that life is indestructible. It is a powerful and almost joyful song of resurrection, such as we read on the Petelia tablet many centuries later.

> *Thou shalt find to the left of the House of Hades a spring,*
>
> *and by the side thereof standing a white cypress.*
>
> *To this spring approach not near.*
>
> *But thou shalt find another, from the Lake of Memory.*
>
> *Cold water flowing forth, and there are guardians before it.*
>
> *Say, "I am a child of Earth and starry Heaven,*
>
> *but my race is of Heaven alone. This ye know yourselves.*

But I am parched with thirst and I perish. Give me quickly

the cold water flowing forth from the Lake of Memory."

III

In judging discoveries[2] such as Tutankhamon's tomb, the palace of Knossos on Crete or the royal tombs at Ur, it is difficult at first to find the right perspective. These finds, which are truly extraordinary, constitute one of the elements of an ordered image of the past, and are at the same time a revelation of the historical background against which all of us, consciously or unconsciously, play our parts.

LEONARD WOOLLEY

THE DISCOVERY OF MINOAN civilization is the work of one man—Arthur Evans. He was not the first whose attention was drawn to the mysterious island in the wine-dark sea. For decades many amateur archaeologists had been going there to ferret around. One Spanish consul had announced that there was a buried palace near Knossos 180 feet long and 140 feet wide. Toward the end of the 1870s, Schliemann, the discoverer of Troy—he who put his unbounded faith in Homer and was not disappointed—entered into complicated negotiations whose object was precisely the purchase of those grounds where, under a layer of earth covered with olive trees, the palace of Minos had lain hidden for thousands of years. This transaction was never realized, because the Cretan owner of the land turned out to be a fraud and a crook, which the solid Schliemann could not tolerate.

Before Evans, the Italian archaeologist Federico Halbherr and his French colleague Joubin were active on the island, as

was the American journalist and lover of archaeology, Stillmann. It seemed that a great scientific sensation was in the air.

But before we tell that story, let us look a little more closely at Arthur Evans. This will be useful, for it will allow us to understand why the honor of discovery falls to him, and explain why he gave us Knossos in the form he did.

He was short, even small, not too attractive physically, and his explosive temperament made him more enemies than friends, but these natural deficits and character flaws were compensated for by an unbreakable will, a solid education and enormous reserves of energy. Fortune granted him a long life and personal wealth which permitted him to carry out forty years of excavation and to conduct his fanciful reconstructions.

He was born in 1851 in the small town of Hemel-Hampstead, into a family of wealthy industrialists and scientists. His grandfathers on both the sword and distaff side were members of the Royal Society, his father a prominent geologist, anthropologist, expert on prehistoric archaeology and collector of antiquities.

A proud household, filled with souvenirs, Victorian virtues, and fossils. From his early youth Arthur was passionate about coins, which was not unconnected with his hopeless myopia, which we mention in order to understand better the later mistakes of this great archaeologist.

Joan Evans in her book *Time and Chance* writes of her half-brother as follows: “Evans was extremely[3] shortsighted and always wore spectacles. Without them he could see only small objects held a few centimeters from his eye, but then in the most minute detail, while everything around him was a vague blur. For this reason details, which he saw in microscopic precision, as if cut off from the outside world, possessed a greater importance for him than they did for other people.”

But Evans’s whole character and personality were the contrary of what is usually called a “bookworm.” Already at

Harrow, his famous school, the future discover of Knossos became known as an exceptionally able and quite unruly boy (he edited the satirical student paper "The Serpent," halted by the teaching staff after the first issue, as well as a fine swimmer and equestrian, which was of vital significance for his future career as an explorer. For archaeology in its heroic period demanded of its adepts great physical stamina, and also personal courage. Sunbaked deserts, swarms of insects carrying diseases, long nights in stuffy barracks under a mosquito net, the peril of malaria, the revolts of illiterate workers, solitude—these were the common scenario and the price stoically paid for a salvaged stone, inscription, sculpture.

The young Evans goes to Oxford, spending his free time and holidays traveling, and that to places that are far from banal, to Rome, say, or Paris. He is drawn to lands lying on the edge of civilized Europe—Lapland, Finland, the Crimea, Bulgaria, Romania, and of course, Greece.

Evans had a particular sympathy for the Slavic countries of southeastern Europe. He was fascinated by the Dalmatian coast with its mosaic of cultures, its splendid landscape and its people conscious of their past and fighting for liberty in isolation. The scion of a conservative family becomes a liberal, a supporter of Gladstone. He decides to defend the cause of the Slavs held in bondage by the Turks, against prevailing public opinion in his own country and the intrigues of the Great Powers.

This chapter of Evans's life could be titled "Political Adventures of an Archaeologist." The future discover caught the political bug, something that happens to many young and clever people of all times. Misfortunes on his university career path also played a role. The young scholar finished his course of studies brilliantly, but he was not popular in the conservative milieu of Oxford, and as if in revenge he became a political *enfant terrible.*

Even though Evans clearly acted to spite his family, his undertakings are full of common sense, vigor, and consequence. He bravely steps into the dense thicket of Balkan problems (and is even arrested and accused of spying for

Russia), writes a book on Bosnia-Herzegovina which he sends to prominent politicians, and in 1877 he becomes a special correspondent for the excellent and influential newspaper the *Manchester Guardian* and settles in Raguza (now Dubrovnik).

He is a born correspondent, a reporter with a fine style, frequently risking his personal safety, engaged in the affairs of the oppressed Slavs, consumed by a passion for bearing witness to the truth. Untiring, he crosses the peaks and wilds of Montenegro, swims across rivers, wanders on foot and on horseback, reaches the rebels' headquarters, writes with horror of the cruelties of the Turks toward the local populations, and when the British consul announces that his articles are the stuff of fantasy, he sends the *Guardian* a detailed list of burnt villages and names of officers of the Turkish terror.

During this time he marries the daughter of an Oxford historian and friend of his and purchases a lovely Venetian house in Dubrovnik called the Casa San Lazzaro. This by no means betokens an abandonment of his journalistic and political activities. When the next rebellion against Austria breaks out, Evans remains in contact with the rebels and writes enthusiastically of their victories. And here he oversteps the bounds of patience of the occupation authorities. He is arrested by the Austrians, and in the spring of 1881 he and his wife are ordered to leave Dalmatia. To the satisfaction of his family, he returns to England. "He has learnt his lesson now and will stay at home—I hope," writes one of his relatives.

A vain hope. The rebellious Evans could not find a place for himself in any traditional framework. He is irritated by the absence of broad horizons in official academic archaeology, with its shallow cult of Classical and only Classical art, and by pedantic scholarly pigeon-holes. "It is as if there were a separate geography of the islands and the continents, or deluvial geology and alluvial geology bearing no relation to one another" he writes scornfully in one of his letters. Intuition led him in the right direction, but he had to obtain the factual material.

Evans then travels to Greece for serious scientific reconnaissance. In Athens he visits the great Heinrich

Schliemann. They are separated by a significant age difference (almost 30 years) and by fame. The German archaeologist has all his great discoveries behind him: Troy, Tiryns, and Mycenae; his younger British colleague is merely the promising graduate of a great university: if he had died at that time he would have sunk to the depths of oblivion with his untested contestation of the contemporary state of knowledge about the past.

What did they talk about? One can imagine what the meeting was like. Schliemann probably talked about Homer, Evans listened respectfully, but completely immersed, looking at the golden objects from Mycenae, as well as the jewelry and stamps—holding the treasures a few centimeters from his hopelessly myopic eyes. These objects have been his passion for a long time. They have decorative motifs remote from those of Classical Greece which school effectively brought him to loathe. Schliemann's treasures bring to mind Assyria and Egypt. But again, this is an intuition, an aesthetic impression. And perhaps, like a physicist or astronomer anticipating an undiscovered element or star, Evans guesses, believes, posits the existence of an undiscovered civilization connecting ancient Eastern culture to the "Greek miracle" in a clear causal chain.

It is difficult to say whether the meeting with Schliemann was a turning-point for Evans. But years later he will remember his predecessor with reverence and sympathy: "Something of the Romantic experience of his earlier years had stuck to him; I was left with a memory almost of mystery when I was sitting across from that man dressed in black, slender, delicately built, with an earthy complexion, wearing oddly-shaped pince-nez through which he stared penetratingly into the earth."

After his return to England, Evans is appointed curator of the Ashmolean Museum, founded in Oxford in the nineteenth century and then in an atrocious state—collections of differing value, many periods, and often dubious provenance. He continues his intensive research trips. During one of them his beloved wife Margaret suddenly dies—the faithful companion of his arduous scientific expeditions, known in family circles

for the witty letters in which she described the daily life of the "hunter of the past," including a hunt for bedbugs in some godforsaken Balkan inn.

In the spring of 1894 Arthur Evans set foot on the island of his destiny for the first time. He felt an immediate affection for Crete. He found everything there that had delighted him in Dalmatia: a courageous people under Turkish occupation, a dramatic landscape, monuments and traces of a long Hellenic, Roman, French, Venetian, and Turkish history. Under this colorful mosaic of many cultures, Evans thought he would find something that no one had yet named, no one had yet touched.

Before the excavation work had started, he noted: "The golden age of Crete lies far away, beyond the boundaries of history as we know it," and continued with a sentence that seems paradoxical to us: "Nothing moves an archaeologist studying the relicts of the distant past more than those he finds in a place where objects from historical periods are relatively rare and insignificant."

Another return to England, and then in March 1899 the expedition to Crete, this time with the concrete aim of starting excavation work. There are three of them: Evans, David George Hogarth—younger than Evans but more experienced in archaeological techniques, and Duncan MacKenzie, a Scottish redhead, polyglot, and expert in keeping an excavation day book. They sail off like the Argonauts to undertake one of the most splendid adventures in the modern humanities. There is a storm at sea. The long gone Minoans are defending their secret.

Without delay excavation work is started in the vicinity of Knossos, on the hill of Kefalos. And already in the first days a vast labyrinthine construction emerges before the archaeologists' eyes.

Under the date March 27, 1899, Evan notes in his journal: "An extraordinary phenomenon—we found nothing Greek, nothing Roman—apart from one fragment of black enamel. We were somewhat led astray by the geometrical ceramics from the seventh century bc, as well as by tombs found near

the main road […]. The flowering of Knossos should be dated much earlier. I'll say more than that: the great peak of this civilization has to be put back as far as the pre-Mycenean period."

And thus was born a new sphere of knowledge about our past. Suddenly a light fell on the Greek world which was seemingly fully known. The traditional, nineteenth-century isolation of the "Greek miracle" from the surrounding world of barbarians had to be sent to the scrap-heap of unconfirmed theories.

Evans was faced with a task that exceeded—from our point of view today—the strength of one man. If the discovery had been made half a century later, a powerful international organization and a large staff of scientists would probably have watched over the excavations.

It was Evans's dream to decipher Cretan script. For many decades he pursued this aim stubbornly and in vain. In fact, on the day he stood at the foot of the hill of Kefalos and thirty workers stuck their shovels in the earth, he did not at all expect fate to grant him the rare privilege and the title of discoverer of an unknown civilization.

He was forty-nine years old, almost the same age as Schliemann when he had started the excavations at Troy. He did not discover golden masks, treasure-chests, precious stones —as at Mycenae—but stood eye to eye with a mature and exquisite art, an architecture full of charm and subtlety, and an astonishingly sweet, I want to say decadent, way of life that emanated from the uncovered ruins. The labyrinth of steps, rooms, corridors, terraces, and courtyards seemed unending and Evans patiently moved ahead step by step, holding onto Ariadne's thread. Soon he had to triple the number of hired workers. The undertaking was truly on an unprecedented scale.

Evans hired professional architects, and not—as was the custom—in the final stage of work, to put the last maps, the horizontal and vertical layout of the found remains, into order —but from the start of the excavation. His first collaborator was Theodore Fyfe—an architect from the British

Archaeological School in Athens; then Christian Doll and finally Piet de Jong. What does this mean? It means that at the very outset Sir Arthur made the decision which so many specialists cannot forgive him, namely the decision to do a reconstruction.

In Evans's defense it can be said that the material of which Knossos was built was enough to drive anyone to despair. It was as if the palace was made of mist and dreams, it fled before the archaeologist, the walls covered with murals crumbled to dust at the lightest touch, the burnt wooden columns, or rather the traces of them, did not hold up any ceiling. So Evans resolved to pursue his own vision of the palace. Writing of his work, the Austrian scholar Camillo Praschniker permitted himself a very malicious but not wholly untrue remark. He calls Knossos a "film set of a city," no less, where "you wander among hypotheses which though they are made of fortified concrete, are incredibly fragile."

When we come into contact with the works of the past we want to be sure they are authentic, that no one has corrected them, no one has got in to pretty them up, finish them, make them more comprehensible. We want to throw a bridge across the abyss of time to the gods and people of past millennia by ourselves, without the aid of intermediaries. Not being excessively spiritual myself, I have always looked for material traces to establish comprehension and covenant. That is why I was invariably moved by potholes along Roman roads, cathedral steps worn by pilgrims, a mason's mark on a stone.

The visitor of the palace at Knossos is deprived of these delights. The modern building materials, the columns painted in ruddy dark red paint with black fundamentals and capitals dispel the presence of the old inhabitants.

It must be said that Evans met with criticism of his methods quite early on. One of his first opponents was the director of the British Archaeological School in Athens, Hogarth. At first the scholars worked in agreement, but quickly their paths diverged. Hogarth reproached Evans with squandering funds (which were from the start partly public funds) on fancy reconstructions intended more for laymen than for specialists.

And indeed, Evans's penchant for the spectacular could prompt reservations. "The restoration of the 'Throne Hall,' for example, was not the result of scientific methods but merely satisfied a desire to recreate in palpable form what should be left to the imagination," Hogarth wrote to Evans, threatening to cut his grant.

The grant was in fact cut in 1902. Evans must have taken all this into account, since he writes in a letter to his father in November 1900 (more than a year before the excavation began): "The palace at Knossos was my idea and my work, and it has turned out to be the kind of discovery that is scarcely to be anticipated in the course of a single life, or even the course of many human lives. Whether the Society (the Cretan Excavation Society) should help me is another question. If it were to give the money to me personally, that would be entirely acceptable. But we may also keep at least part of Knossos in the family! I am quite decided on it […], because I and I alone must retain control over what I have undertaken. Certainly there are people who would do things differently, but I know this is my position. Perhaps it is not the best course, but it is the only possible one for me if I am to continue the work."

This is a very characteristic mark of Evans's personality. Knossos remained his private passion and possession for thirty years. He did not wish to share the glory with anyone, so responsibility for the form the palace took falls to him alone. The work consumed a significant part of the finder's personal fortune—a quarter of a million pounds sterling, then a mighty currency.

Evans's unassailable achievement was not only gathering the vast material but the first great attempt to systemize it and create a chronology of ancient Crete. He also tried to grasp all the interdependencies and links between the newly found civilization and the history of Troy, the Cyclades and Hellas, and particularly links with the history of Egypt and Mesopotamia (the two oldest and best known of cultures). This was possible due to the discovery of Anatolian, Syrio-Phoenician, and Egyptian objects on Crete, as well as Cretan objects that archaeologists found in the East. The relations

between Egypt and Crete were of special interest to Evans, and it was the history of Egypt, grasped in the greatest detail thanks to written sources, that had a decisive influence on the periodization of Cretan civilization.

Evans called the period from the end of the Neolithic age up to the invasion of Crete by the Achaeans the Minoan age. A homage to the nameless kings of the island state.

The discoverer of Knossos divided Minoan civilization into three ages, based in part on ceramics: the early Minoan age of 3400–2100 B.C., characterized by "smoked" ceramics, often monochromatic; the middle Minoan age of 2100 to 1580 B.C., with the ceramics called Kamares (from the name of a town) with colored patterns on a dark background, and finally the late Minoan age of 1580–1200 B.C., which corresponds with the ceramics that show dark patterns on a light background.* The ages are divided into periods and phases, and it is typical of Evans to repeat the triadic myth cycle as if under the influence of the legend of Zeus, who extended the reign of King Minos every ten years.

"To this great expanse of time," writes the discoverer of Knossos, "covering more than two thousand years, we have applied a division into three principal ages: the early, middle and late Minoan, and then for each of these, three periods, although one should not take this too punctiliously or with clockmaker's precision. Each period lasts on average 250 years, and the periods of an earlier age are naturally longer. This division, if we look at the development of the whole of Minoan civilization or at its stages, is essentially both logical and scientific. For in each characteristic phase of a culture we observe times of bloom, maturity, and decline. The three principle ages of Minoan history correspond roughly with the Old, Middle and Early periods of the New Egyptian State."

In fact the chronology proposed by Evans had a number of weak points and has undergone many amendments, additions, and changes. It relates mainly to Knossos, but falls short in other Minoan cities like Mallia or Phaestos, as if they had kept to local clocks and had a different measure of time. Moreover, new archaeological discoveries undermined virtually the

whole chronology of the ancient Orient and Egypt. The Hyksos invasion of Egypt should be moved forward to around 1720 B.C. The discovery in 1942 of letters of the kings of Chorsabad obliged historians to modify the chronology of Mesopotamia. The reign of Hammurabi, first determined to have been in the years 2123–2081 B.C., is nowadays set at 1848–1806 B.C., or even 1792–1750 B.C. That is why the new researchers Glotz, Matz, and Nikolaos Platon search for grounds for dating Cretan history more solid than Evans's hypotheses and which are supported by the introduction of meal or the toppling of the island palaces.

Evans's life work is *The Palace of Minos at Knossos*. The first volume of this monumental book, a great saga of ancient Cretan civilization, appeared in 1921, the last volume fifteen years later. The whole fills six volumes, more than three thousand pages and about 2500 illustrations.

The Palace of Minos was written in Evans's commodious home in Youlbury furnished largely with books, in intervals between excavation seasons. His half-sister made the following sketch of the scholar in action in her memoirs: "Here he could work on his book—dividing and classifying material in a simple way, namely by putting up a new table on sawhorses for each new chapter and walking from one to the next, like a chess player playing many games simultaneously […]. He truly needed a lot of space; the material was overwhelming; and in addition, while struggling with it, he made no use of any modern conveniences. He had neither a secretary nor a typewriter, and he always used a goose quill."

An indefatigable old man. When he was seventy-five he survived an earthquake on Crete, watching it coolly and attentively like Pliny watching the eruption of Vesuvius. He felt a hunch that it was in this terrifying natural phenomenon that one should see the explanation for the destruction of the culture he discovered and so loved. At eighty he traveled across Crete by hydroplane and had a great fondness for that form of locomotion. Virtually to the end of his life he wielded power over Knossos with an iron hand.

A few years before the outbreak of World War II he visited Dalmatia and the old house in Dubrovnik where he had passed the brief happy years of his marriage with the unforgotten Margaret. “I always come here every fifty years.”

He dies in the glare and rumble of bombs. The patriarch of Mediterranean archaeology, strewn with honors and titles from many universities, knighted by the king, deserved a gentler death after such a stormy life. He works up to the end, taking a lively interest in the course of the war. He suffered deeply the defeat of his beloved countries: France, Yugoslavia, finally Greece. In his Cretan house, named Villa Ariadne, Hitler’s military set up their headquarters. In 1941 he visits the British Museum, which has been devastated by bombs from enemy planes.

How to evaluate this extraordinary figure? It is not for us to do so. The scholar’s successors will make it their ruthless business. And because our generation thinks a little more kindly of the Victorian age than did the generation immediately following it, it will not be too cutting for us to call him the Tennyson of archeology.

IV

Tout traité d’archéologie passe[4].

CHARLES PICARD

IT MIGHT SEEM THAT Evans said everything that could be said about Knossos and Minoan culture; one might suppose that after the great work of discovery nothing was left to his successors but footnotes and submissive repetitions of what Sir Arthur wrote. But in the study of the past, as in any other sphere of knowledge, the discoverer does not have the last word. Marcel Brion says with some melancholy that nothing is completely certain and definite in a science in constant motion like archaeology.

In the middle of 1960, nineteen years after Evans's death, a vehement controversy broke out over a question that might on the face of it seem of interest only to specialists in the field, but which quickly overran their sphere and raged for a good couple of years in the pages of newspapers, in cultural journals, and on the radio. A passionate argument among archaeologists, linguists, and scholars of civilization turned into what was virtually a public spectacle.

The protagonist of the dispute, which was never definitely resolved, was a British scholar and professor at Oxford, Leonard Robert Palmer. He proposed a new chronology, revolutionary because it contradicted the views of the majority of experts, and a new dating for the Greek Bronze Age.

In response to the crucial question when the Greeks arrived on the peninsula which was from then on to be their homeland, history textbooks and the majority of specialists in the field offer an approximate date: shortly after 2000 B.C. Palmer concedes that there was indeed an invasion of the peninsula in that period, but says there is no evidence to lead one to ascribe it to the Greeks. They in his view settled in the lands henceforth called Greece shortly after 1600 B.C., introducing what archaeologists call late Hellenic or Mycenean culture.

As we will see in a moment this is not merely a pedantic quibble about dates, but a controversy entailing a multitude of real problems, as well as a revalorization of the roles and influences of specific cultural spheres. The question was again posed: where are the sources of our civilization, and which peoples were the true force and motor of that civilization?

Another very important problem is the attempt to answer the question: when did the Greeks conquer Crete? Here once again the majority of scholars, following Evans, give an approximate date: around 1450 B.C. Moreover, for these scholars that date is synonymous with the catastrophe of Minoan culture, with its sudden collapse. The period 1400–1100 B.C. is generally considered the period of the final decline, crumbling to dust, and extinction of the civilization that flourished for so many centuries. A favorite pupil of Evans, the distinguished young archaeologist and palace

curator, John Pendlebury (who fell fighting heroically alongside the Cretan partisans in World War II), says with pictorial flair that in those times, Knossos was a ruin with ravaged stairs and scattered walls, amid which wandered the dim ghosts of the past, and wild, barbaric tenants unaware of what this place had once been.

Palmer also took serious issue with this view, which had seemed firmly founded in history. He thought, unlike most researchers, that the period called a period of decline was an age of artistic excellence and economic prosperity for Crete. True, the island was under Greek rule, but it was still the center of a vibrant culture.

In the church of scholars, archaeologists, linguists, historians of Greece's Bronze Age, the following heresy emerged. As in a trial, if one wishes to appeal a verdict, one must refer to new evidence; the defenders of Evans demanded facts justifying the revelatory hypothesis. Palmer states that his dramatic revision is based above all on the Linear B script deciphered in 1952 (the script which had been an enigma to Evans) and on the discovery by the American scholar Blegen in the palace of Nestor in 1939 of a whole archive of tablets covered with Linear B script, the same script that Evans had found in Knossos. Now, the tablets from the Greek continent (more of them were found at Pylos) date beyond all doubt to 1200 B.C. How to explain this hiatus of two centuries between the continental tablets and those from the island? Had Evans not (consciously) made a mistake in his dating? Are the Minoans really, as the discoverer of Knossos would have it, the inventors of the script, or was it, on the contrary, created on the continent?

Well, scholars are human beings, not devoid of passion. It is therefore not strange that they like to attribute to the civilizations they discover more importance, more splendor, a greater reach of influence than they really had.

Analyzing the content of the deciphered tablets from Nestor's archive, Palmer comes to the conclusion that around 1200 B.C., Knossos was exporting to the continent many ceramic and metal artifacts (bronze tripods for example), and

therefore in his view one cannot speak of a decline in Minoan culture at that time.

And finally one must reckon with what the Master Poet says. Homer has never let an archaeologist down. He led the way to Troy. He said that Agamemnon ruled in Mycenae and Schliemann found his castle. He put Nestor in Pylos and Blegen found his palace. Why would the Infallible and Great Poet be wrong—when he said that Idomeneus, the king of Crete, grandson of Minos, whose capital was in Knossos, took part in the Trojan War (around 1100 B.C.) and was one of its heroes? Idomencus put up eighty ships, after all (only ten less than the mighty Nestor); he was also nominated as the warrior to meet Hector in single combat. And finally, he was one of the stealthy Trojan horse's crew—one of the first to make his way into the city. This is how Palmer seeks to unite lovers of Homer in support of his thesis arguing for the greatness of Crete in the period of the island's alleged decline.

And finally, something straight from a crime novel: material proof hidden in the cellars of a museum, a document unknown to scholars discovered by Palmer, which casts a shadow on the memory of the discoverer of Knossos. And here the scholarly polemic turned into a scandal about falsification.

"By February 1960[5]," Palmer writes, "I felt I could no longer accept Evans's dating of the Linear B tablets found at Knossos. I began a series of studies which revealed new documents deriving from the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford. Above all, and most importantly, we found the *Day Book of the Knossos Excavations* kept by Duncan Mackenzie, Evans's assistant. This document became a great aid in establishing the facts. Now, Evans's main basis for establishing the dates of the tablets was a stratification made in a little room called the Stirrup Vase room (after a type of ceramics with a characteristic ornament). The excavation day book says something completely different, and is in accordance with Evans's own notes, which I have had the opportunity to study. And finally, we now have the copies made by Sir Arthur himself of the Linear B tablets; these were found last month in the Ashmolean Museum. These documents indicate that the tablets to which the discoverer of Knossos attached so much

significance were not found in the aforementioned room but in an entirely different part of the Palace. All these heretofore unknown facts force us to question Evans's stratification and dating."

One couldn't be clearer or more ruthless.

This conclusion of Palmer's requires a few words of clarification. One might ask: why make such a fuss over a couple of broken pots—in this case, those stirrup motif vases? Is it not better to trust the intuition and experience of the discoverer? But science is not built on faith in authorities, and like a court judge, an archaeologist must give a clear and exact answer to three fundamental questions: what was found, where, and with what? This "with what," meaning in the company of what kind of objects, is of vital importance, because it allows us to date not only objects of art but whole periods of civilization. It is ceramics that most often plays the role of the "archaeological clock"—the measure of time. For we know the most about its development, sequence, and changes of style through time, and besides, to speak plainly, broken pots stay where they are, in the archaeological layer where they were thrown, because they are not an object of desire for looters, like gold artifacts or works of art.

But let us return to the quarrel. Palmer's accusations were grave and it is not surprising that they provoked a polemical storm. The discoverer and highest authority on questions of Minoan culture was accused—to put it mildly—of having distorted the research results and bent them to an a priori thesis. Palmer also pointed out that Evans had arbitrarily—that is, without basing his claim on real results of excavation—taken Minoan civilization to be significantly older than it really was. The same is the case in the delicate matter of influences. If we accept Palmer's thesis, the role of Crete as a source of Mycenean and Greek civilization is considerably weaker.

The corrections and additions that researchers will make to the epochal work of the discoverer of Knossos are significant, even if they are quieter and have less of a taste of public scandal than Palmer's heretical hypotheses. The deciphering of

older inscriptions and new archaeological discoveries may yet bring many a revelation. The problem of Crete, its most famous history, the role and importance of this civilization is far from being conclusively settled.

Several years ago a German scholar, professor Hans Georg Wunderlich, came forward with a bold hypothesis concerning what the palace discovered by Evans had really been. Let us add that Wunderlich is not an archaeologist but a palaeontologist. But it often happens that scholars in other fields throw a new light on riddles that seemed already solved, or at the very least initiate a fertile discussion. This probably happens because they are less attached to intellectual schemas and do not take as a given what may still be an object of reflection and doubt.

So for Wunderlich, Knossos was not the seat of Cretan kings—as Evans would have it and as everyone repeats after him—but a palace of the dead, an enormous cemetery. What we know about the life of the Minoans, just as in the case of the Etruscans, is not the testimony of their ports and cities pulsing with life (conquered and rebuilt by invaders anyway)—but quiet lagoons of death, expansive necropolises, spaces populated by ghosts, tombs more enduring than the houses of the living.

Wunderlich was struck by the flimsiness of the material used to build Knossos. Wooden columns, thin walls, plaster, and stairs laid out in alabaster were more fit for the barefoot processions of the bearers of sacrifice. In addition to that, the rooms are small, often windowless, even if Evans provided them with various names suggesting royal splendor. The Throne Hall, for example, can barely hold twenty people. Hence the idea that they were crypts rather than living quarters.

Although Evans allocated space in his reconstruction for a "household sector," it is astonishingly modest in relation to the vast palace and does not have a sufficient number of buildings suited for use as workshops, kitchens, or stables.

The sanitary system, which is the general delight of tour groups, the traces of sewer installations and water pipes, may

have had an entirely different function than was thought. The huge meter and a half high pithoi—were they really, as Evans claimed, receptacles for olive oil, if the remains of bones were found in them? And were the bathtubs decorated with floral ornamentation not rather sarcophaguses?

Crete the mysterious, its lips and eyes firmly shut, defends itself.

A seismic island, often suffering the wrath of Poseidon, an island of uncertain and unsteady hypotheses.

V

> It is truly the first white civilization; but also like the lagoon of the Maori world, changing in the sun; we cannot bring the *Iliad* or even the *Odyssey* into relation to these courtly entertainments in which naked princes with ostrich feathers in their hair lowered their spears before a Phaedra with bare breasts…
>
> ANDRÉ MALRAUX

WHAT IS MOST STRIKING in Minoan civilization and to my sense brings it close to the Etruscan is the absence of marks of pompous magnificence, majesty, forbidding power, such as emanate from the monuments of Egypt or Assyria—pyramids, a menacing Sphinx, stone tablets on which is written the revenge of the king of kings.

Moreover, not a single portrait of a ruler survives from whose terrifying features, hieratic pose or huge size, overwhelming everything and everyone, we might read the insanity and atrocity of those times. It seems the kings of Crete ruled benignly and departed to their gods stealthily, with a tact and discretion rare in rulers. But perhaps this is our delusion, caused by the need to believe in a golden age, in the innocent childhood of humanity.

It is best to go to Crete straight from Mycenae. This is not a rule based on a transport schedule, the places are not even directly connected, but if we closed our eyes in Mycenae and opened them in Knossos, we would feel a shock and would understand the essential difference in style and spirit of these two centers of Mediterranean culture.

It is a point well known from art history textbooks, but confirming it with one's own eyes has an incontrovertible force of revelation.

The centerpoint of the Mycenean palace is the *megaron*—a hall separated off, quite dark and not very big, just right for the king and his leaders to meet in conference before a pillaging expedition. The most characteristic feature of this architectural ensemble is the impossibility of building outward and being cramped, closed into the tight armor of walls. A habitat deep rather than spacious, as if modeled on a cave, and with only one not very wide entrance that can easily be slammed in the face of uninvited guests. The roofs of the buildings have double slopes and were evidently dragged here from a land of mist and rain. In a word, a vast castle reminiscent in atmosphere of the medieval fortresses with their precipice-like casemates.

How different is the royal palace at Knossos, with its great number of halls and rooms grouped around a central courtyard; an enormous architectural complex, almost a city—not protected by any walls (which prompted surprise and admiration)—quite open to the air and sun. It gave me the impression of a honeycomb, because it could be enlarged at will, a "blossoming system" if you like, and at the same time its "organic" quality was based on its being rooted perfectly in the terrain, on the natural use of elevations and declivities. Terraces lovely as cascades of water run down the hillside.

This architecture is picturesque almost to the point of theatricality, more reminiscent of the layered decorations of some great opera hall than of a seat of kings, a lofty throne made of boulders, a building from which gravity and strength should emanate. This general impression is so irresistible and

insistent that it makes one wonder what its origins and causes are.

Above all the building material is light, fragile, making gargantuan constructions impossible. There is no trace here of the Cyclopean walls that characterize Mycenean building. The walls made of small stones joined with mortar are thin, wooden columns and frescoes transform the rough surfaces into colorful curtains.

But neither the kind of building material nor the presence of painting explains it all. I think the impression of theatricality comes from the Minoan builders' artistic assumptions, from their aesthetics. This would explain the many layers, the variability of spacial rhythms, the large number of stairs, windows the light fell through, and the surprising perspectives. It is a dynamic, capricious architecture that mocks monumentality. Let us add the unprecedented comfort, the bathrooms, the water supply system one looks for in vain in Italian or French castles three thousand years later. You want to say this is not a place of grim power and cruelty but of innocent intrigues and coquetry.

This is the impression one has, and many pages have been written in honor of this first European civilization, which was said to be suffused with happiness, peace, and joy. But we, the children of skepticism, know too much about the lies of art that gloss over reality so that dolphin frescoes, flowers, and goddesses with human smiles can lull us and dull our vigilance.

It is remarkable, however, that not architecture nor frescoes (leaving aside even the clumsy reconstructions), nor sculpture —although in fact there is no monumental sculpture—are crucial to the greatness of Cretan art, but little figurines of faience and clay, revelatory ceramics, engraved half-precious stones, stamps and jewelry, as if life on Minos's island had been a game, a somewhat shallow amusement, superficial, carefree, devoid of ecstasy, passion, and suffering.

The British scholar and expert on Crete, Moses I. Finley, writes: "There is a paradox here[6]: as far as mobilizing people and materials was concerned, the palace's builders worked on

a grand scale, while everything else was on a small scale, both materially and emotionally. It seems neither religion nor royal power demanded anything more. One also has the impression that by the beginning of the middle period, life, in the sense of institutions and ideology, was stabilized, found an equilibrium that did not waver for 500 or 600 years. Those were years of security from every point of view, passive security, and nothing provoked any change or rebellion. From that time we date the significant improvement of technology, a growing population, palaces constantly enlarged, but all this took place along what might be called a horizontal line.

"And suddenly came the great natural catastrophe around 1400 B.C.—and virtually from one day to the next the palaces of Crete were turned into ruins, and for good. We know nothing of the details of the catastrophe; the Linear B tablets that date from that exact time say nothing about it. But the ruins are the sufficient and undeniable proof: no one managed to mobilize this small people again and govern it, as the old kings had for 600 long years."

The best known Greek legend connected to Crete is the story of the Minotaur. Let us recall it in the briefest form. The mighty king Minos received a fine bull as a gift from Poseidon. The king's wanton wife seduced the bull. From this coupling the Minotaur was born, a monster with the head of a bull and the body of a man. To hide his shame, King Minos ordered Daedalus to build a labyrinth. Every nine years the Athenians, then under Cretan rule, sent a sacrifice of seven girls and seven boys from their best families. And the Minotaur made a tasty meal of Athenian youth.

Theseus, the son of the Athenian king, was sent to Crete with this grim offering. Having arrived there he seduced Minos's daughter Ariadne. With the aid of her spool of thread he entered the labyrinth and killed the Minotaur, and after that he sailed off to his native city with Ariadne—unpursued by Minos.

The legend of Theseus can be interpreted in many ways, like all legends that weld a folk tale to a religious myth. Its hero personifies a typical Greek admiration for cleverness—or

intelligence—triumphant over dark forces, the victory of rational order over chaos. Some find in this tale a transfiguration of historical facts, namely the process of Athens liberating itself from Cretan rule. In such an interpretation Theseus advances to the role of liberator, political hero, leader of an Athenian revolt that freed his country from the alien yoke.

It is a Greek legend, anti-Cretan and like everything that is only "anti," injurious. After all, even in the Hellenic tradition Minos was a symbol of justice, not cruelty, and after his death the gods made him one of the judges in the shadowy world of Hades.

In Cretan iconography there is no image of the Minotaur, but the bull is omnipresent, though never presented as an ominous monster; on the contrary, it was more a victim (on the famous sarcophagus from Hagia Triada) or an animal appearing in games, contests, and festivities (the fresco in the Knossos palace showing the bloodless tauromachia).

Nor does Greek art portray the Minotaur as a repulsive beast or one arousing fear and trembling. I remember clearly a beautiful amphora, in the Attic style with black figures, which represents the unequal battle of Theseus with the beast: an easy victory for man. The Minotaur is on its knees. Theseus has his left arm around his opponent's neck in a predatory gesture; his right hand is driving a short sword into its neck. The Minotaur is handsome and defenseless. He has the well-shaped body of a young man with a bull's head. A braid of blood falls from the nape of his neck to the ground.

Poor Minotaur! From my earliest childhood I felt more tenderness for him than for Theseus, Daedalus, or any other sly-boots. When my father told me the tale for the first time I felt a painful ache in my heart and compassion for the half-beast half-man trapped in the labyrinth and in an alien human history full of cunning and axes.

Maciuś probably had something to do with it, Maciuś my private Minotaur, who lived under the stairs leading to the cellar and to whom I made sacrifices from my curbed gluttony —chocolates and sweets, useless as processions and bells. For

him I had to transgress against a severe parental taboo, a ban on contact with animals, the carriers of germs. But isn't it a greater disease, even a deformity, to tame the feeling of honor and submission to an unknown will that has been rooted in us from palaeolithic times? I owe it to Maciuś that my later reading of the mystics did not completely baffle me; he was inaccessible to me, filled with an alien life, only seldom did a purr answer my litany of love, my impassioned acts of worship; he looked down impassively from the height of his feline divinity.

But returning to our subject—can we even speak of the history of ancient Crete if we lack written sources beyond the scanty information passed down by the Greeks or Egyptians? Only material traces bear witness to this long history—ruins of houses and palaces, ceramics, frescoes, burnt clay statuettes, sarcophagi. We don't even know the names of the kings of the Minoan dynasty, we know nothing of the wars they waged or the colonies they probably founded on neighboring islands. The homeland of Phaedra, Ariadne, the Minotaur, Androgeos, the cradle of Zeus—an island favored by mythology—keeps a demure silence on its earthly political and social history.

The decipherment of Linear B script did not throw much light on the history of Crete or its inhabitants. In fact, the brilliant discovery of Chadwick and Ventris—that scaling of the Mount Everest of Greek archaeology, as they say—yielded an important confirmation of the conquest of Crete by the Greeks, but the rest is a monotonous inventory of objects, as if the script had been invented for accountants, not for poets, prophets, or royal chroniclers.

Did the Minoans have their *aoides*, Homers and epics, did they have a literature? It may have been written on transient material—papyrus or bark—and the fires that burnt the palaces may have consumed it for good. The frescoes, stamps, and gems portray priests, singers, musicians, but not one of the known iconographic documents preserves a portrait of a troubadour or even a scribe.

Much has been written on Minoan religion, for nothing inflames the imaginations of researchers more than a lack of

documentation and indisputable evidence. Scholars of religion —those poets of the humanities—often succumb to magical thinking, whose characteristic mark is the conviction that "everything is connected to everything." With the aid of risky analogies—formal similarities in symbolism—they build dazzling theories that relate civilizations remote from each other in time and space, theories that leave the layman daunted and fascinated.

In the archaeological museum in Heraklion my attention was drawn to an object that pressed on my imagination less by virtue of its aesthetic value than by its mysterious function. It is an ivory board found in Knossos, inlaid with mountain crystal, blue paste, and silver and gold leaf. This object is thought to have been a dice playing board and is called by common consent a "chessboard." But what was the game? Was it a game of pure chance, or did it require intelligence and scheming ability? Was it played by two players or perhaps more? And most interesting to me: what was it in its essence—a mindless entertainment, a way to kill time on rainy winter evenings, or a contest giving rein to great passions?

It is the same when we touch on ancient cults and faiths—but let the analogy not suggest anything frivolous. All agree that ancient civilizations, including the Minoan, were founded on religion. It inspired not only art but institutions. All other spheres of life could develop only in harmony with religion and under its powerful influence. We know this from the Minoan excavations. We found sanctuaries, a vast number of cult objects, and the murals and engravings give us a pretty faithful and detailed description of the ceremonies. But this is what Picard called a beautiful illustrated book without a text. We can sometimes decipher the script of extinct civilizations, but we cannot read the hearts of long-deceased people.

But we can say something about the Minoan religion without resorting to risqué hypotheses. The characteristic feature of this religion is a predilection for symbols; they are meant to evoke a mood of sanctity and the god's presence without the necessity of making the god visible. This is said by experts to be proof of a high degree of spiritualism.

The elements of fetishism—just as in other primitive religions—are numerous, one might say omnipresent. Objects of adoration could be boulders, cave stalactites, tree trunks and stones, so-called betyls. A golden signet was found in Phaestos that portrays the dance of a naked woman before a *betyl*—the prototype of the column, which before it became a simple element of architecture was the object of a cult. Double-edged axes played a big role; we find them on frescoes, ceramics, and gems, and they were also often executed in stone, bronze, silver, and even gold. What did this odd ax signify? Was it a sacred instrument for religious sacrifice, or perhaps a sign of the lightning bolt and the god who wielded it—or perhaps a symbolic merging of a male and female divinity? Experts are divided on the issue. One thing only seems clear, that the name of Minos's palace derives from the (non-Greek) name of the ax—*labrys*. So "labyrinth" would then mean "palace of double-edged axes."

Trees were also worshipped: pines, palms, olive trees, cypresses, as were animals: snakes, doves, monkeys, lions, and of course bulls, which occupy a privileged position in the Cretan bestiary.

It is hard to give an answer to the important question in what age anthropomorphic tendencies appeared, or to put it differently, when, from behind the amulets, fetishes, and symbols, did a deity show a face that looked human? But one thing is certain: female deities predominated, and in the initial phase there were only female deities, much like in the religions of ancient Anatolia. The Cretan Olympus, so vague to us in many details, was ruled by a mighty goddess of nature, ruler of the world, people, animals, and plants, mistress of the sun and moon, earth, sea, and hell—the Great Mother. The vast number of images of her, deriving from different ages, allows us to trace her various attributes. She appears in the shape of terracotta statuettes as a symbol of fertility, surrounded by lions, snakes, and birds, on ships as the patroness of navigation, and also on helmets and armor, since she was also the goddess of war. Some think the Great Mother was the only goddess of Minoan religion. This view has met with the rather categorical opposition of scholars of religion.

In the Mediterranean Sea basin, with the exception of Judaism, all religions were polytheistic.

The Minoans did not build temples as the Greeks or Egyptians did. At first they made sacrifices in natural caves like Kamares on the slopes of Ida or Psychro in the Dikte massif. Neolithic inhabitants of these caves built themselves houses and made room for the gods. In the first phase of the Middle Minoan age, small cult sites appear on mountaintops, amid cliffs, near springs, marked off by trees and low walls. In that period the construction of chapels in living quarters, mainly palaces, is also begun.

The Cretans' religious ceremonies—judging from the records preserved on gems, vases, and signets—must have been breathtaking spectacles. They probably began with acts of purification, followed by a bloody sacrifice of goats, sheep, and bulls (at important ceremonies up to ten bulls were slaughtered) and those sacrifices are a frequent subject of Minoan art. Then came libations. The whole ceremony was concluded with a grand colorful procession, filled with dance, music, and the fumes from censers, rousing them to a state of ecstasy and bringing the gods and demons down to earth.

The rituals of the cult were not led by priests but by priestesses, not surprisingly in a religion that made the Great Mother the chief deity in its Pantheon. They are easily recognized on Cretan wall paintings by their typical dress: they wear bras that leave the breasts uncovered, long skirts of leather or ankle-length dresses, and tiaras on their heads. Priests make their appearance late and their role (with the obvious exception of the king—the High Priest of the Sacred Bull) seems to have been minor.

So the religion of the Minoans is an enigmatic thicket of questions. We cannot find out to what extent it was the original creation of the Cretan spirit and to what extent it was subject to the influences of other religions. We may speculate that connections existed between the Egyptian Apis and Minos, between Asiatic fertility cults and the Great Mother of the Cretans, but the nature of the connections is unclear.

Diodorus, a Greek historian of the age of Julius Caesar, writes: “The Cretans say that tribute offered to the gods, sacrifices, initiations, mysteries, are all an invention of the inhabitants of Crete, and that other peoples borrowed from them.” This sentence, written more than a dozen centuries after the fall of Minoan culture, is worth reflecting on.

The Greeks owe much to the Minoans. It was there that the legend of Zeus was born, the god who ruled over Olympus for long centuries. And it is very likely that the cult of Demeter, her bestiary, agrarian liturgy, and sacred games arrived on the Greek continent straight from the land of Minos.

VI

> Later there were terrible earthquakes and floods[7], and a horrendous day and night came…
>
> PLATO, *TIMAEUS*

> Halfway between Thera and Thirasia[8] a flame suddenly rose from the sea and raged for four days, so that the sea around it burned and boiled.
>
> STRABO, *GEOGRAPHY*

IN THE MIDDLE OF the little Venizelou Square there is the Venetian well of Morosini surrounded by restaurants and cafés —favored spots for evening get-togethers. It was here I usually had dinner and pondered the catastrophe. For nothing encourages brooding on the end of the world so much as a pleasant August night, a sky full of peaceful stars and the surrounding bustle of people at dinner. The cataclysm must have come suddenly—as in Milosz’s poem—without warning or signs from on high.

I have noticed (and I find it a little disturbing) that when I think about the history of a remote civilization I am more

interested in the question of what caused its demise than in any matter concerning its life, splendor, or might. This is probably (I say to justify my fascination with catastrophe) because the factors involved in the phenomenon of growth can be explained rationally: a favorable geographical location, social equilibrium, the wisdom of monarchs and politicians. But there is a mysterious element of fate in the disappearance of states and peoples from the map of the world, and the natural tendency of the mind is to look for the one cause, the original sin of civilization, the decisive moment when the god raised his hand over the oblivious and arrogant people to throw a thunderbolt.

Scholars generally agree as to the approximate date of the collapse of Minoan culture, but they are less in agreement on its causes. Some think that an internal revolution brought an end to Minoan power—a risky thesis insofar as we know almost nothing about ancient Cretan society. Others see the cause of the disaster in an Achaian invasion. The most probable theory, however, seems the one that explains the disappearance of this civilization by a great seismic catastrophe, combined with flood and fire.

This happened all at once. At that moment a ship was sailing into the port with its sails furled, a farmer was turning his plow, a mother was cradling a child, Minos was discussing a convoluted commercial treatise with his advisors, and a palace servant was climbing a mast to hang up a flower wreath in preparation for the approaching holiday. Then it happened.

At the time of the excavations Evans found evident traces of destruction caused by an earthquake. Several palace rooms were “bombarded” with large blocks of stone, which a seismic force shifted from a distant part of the palace. The discover of Knossos himself experienced a series of shocks there on June 26, 1926, which was not without influence on his later assumptions and conclusions. For a long time people have tried to determine the approximate scale of the catastrophe and the direction from which death came.

A hundred kilometers to the north of Crete is the island Santorini, also called Thira or Thera. In ancient times it bore

the name Kalliste, or Beautiful, though even now it is not among the gloomier islands in the Cycladic archipelago. Its size is modest, the surface measuring about 75 square kilometers, and its shape is oddly that of an inverted letter C with its bulbous side turned to the east. From a bird's-eye view it looks like the jaw of an antedeluvian monster thrown into the sea. Two kilometers west of Thera lie two smaller islands. Thirasia and Aspronisia. This little archipelago has a very clear round outline and it isn't hard to guess that it constitutes the edges of an old volcano. The geological structure also points to this. Volcanic rocks of a blue-black color rise from the sea like an unscaleable wall. The island's moonlike landscape changes only in the eastern part—into a green garden of southern trees and vines.

The activity of the volcano on Santorini is well known because of the accounts by the Greek geographer Strabo, who with epic power described a violent eruption in 198 B.C. The reach of the catastrophe extended to the Cyclades, Euboia, Phoenicia, and Syria, and two thirds of the city of Sidon were destroyed. "A singed island rose up amid the flames […] as if someone were fishing it out with tongs." This island exists to this day. It is called Palea Kameni, or Old Burnt Island. Chronicles also record powerful tectonic shocks toward the end of the sixteenth and the beginning of the eighteenth centuries, which resulted in the creation of new islands.

Thera makes a fascinating study for geologists and seismologists, but it was not expected to bring new and truly revelatory materials to archaeologists. On the island there is a copper and volcanic rock mine. In one of its openings the Greek scholar Angelos Galanopoulos in the 1950s stumbled upon traces of a stone building, remains of human bones, and pieces of petrified wood. The alarm was sounded and archaeologists began systematic research. Settlements of stone houses were discovered, an array of objects, even well-preserved frescoes. One of them—it was given the title *The Coming of Spring*—portrays red flowers and a stylized bird in flight, with its beak open. This fresco has been in the Athens archaeological museum for a few years and on the basis of a simple analysis of technique, line, and use of color one easily

concludes that it belongs to the sphere of Minoan culture. The analysis of organic remains found in the excavated buildings on Thera, performed in an American laboratory using the carbon dating method, permits scientists to date them to the beginning of the fifteen century B.C.

But what does this have to do with the Palace of Minos on Crete? We reply: perhaps everything. Not only have we discovered a Minoan presence beyond Crete, but it is very probable that Thera was the epicenter of a powerful earthquake which put an end to Minoan civilization. It was from there, according to well-founded assumptions, that the destruction came.

It may seem paradoxical that the conditions for archaeological work are much more favorable on Thera than on Crete. Minos's Palace was covered with a thin layer of earth and for that reason the remains dug up (especially the paintings) were in an advanced state of decay. Lava and volcanic ash have a preservative quality, so to speak, witness the splendid state of Pompeii. "If the wishes of archaeologists could come true," the finder of Ur Leonard Woolley good-naturedly writes, "all ancient cities would be strewn with ash by some volcano." Digging on the island of Thera, you do have to penetrate a thirty-meter layer of volcanic matter, but the revelatory booty of archaeologists transforms our knowledge about Mediterranean civilization. Enthusiasts of this find go so far in their hopes as to claim that it was here, not in Knossos, that the capital and center of Minoan power was situated. These hazardous hypotheses will remain linked to the legend of submerged Atlantis—about which more in a moment.

But could a volcano erupting on a small island cause such frightening devastation? We must remember that not only Knossos was hit by the catastrophe but Phaestos too, and Hagia Triada, Tylissos, Amnisos, Mallia, Pseira, Gournia, Palaikastro, and Zakro—all of Crete. In the course of a single day the Homeric island of a hundred cities became a desolate ruin.

Seismologists and geologists say that it was entirely possible. Before the eruption Thera was—they say—three times as big as it is now. It had a volcanic hill 1500 meters high. The catastrophe itself—they think—took a course similar to the explosion of the Krakatau in 1883.

This explosion is described in detail in scientific papers as well as in the daily newspapers of our great-grandfathers. Layers of volcanic ash spewed into the atmosphere sunk Java and Sumatra in an impenetrable night that lasted 48 hours. At the site of the whirlpool a wave rose to forty meters and washed 265 villages from the face of the earth. 36000 people lost their lives. A rain of ash fell at a distance of 2500 kilometers from the site of the explosion.

A catastrophe like this may paralyze the imagination of authors who write on nuclear war. In any case, seismologists claim the volcanic explosion on the island of Thera was four times as strong. The mushroom cloud and flames were seen at a distance of hundreds of kilometers. Bloody rains fell for weeks. Ash was carried as far away as Central Africa and the perimeters of Europe. The thirty-meter wave hit the coast of Crete about a quarter of an hour after the volcano exploded. The force of the explosion many times exceeded that of the bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

It is therefore not strange that the memory of the cataclysm was passed on from generation to generation. We find it in legends, sacred texts, the writings of ancient authors. It appears in the Greek myth about the flood of Deukalion. In an Egyptian papyrus from the 18th dynasty we read of “a long night, thunder and floods, and days when the sun in the heavens was pale as the moon […] One could not leave one’s house, violent storms raged for nine days. Oh, may the roar of the earth at last fall silent!”

And finally, the Bible itself. Scholars contend that the ten plagues of Egypt described in the books of Moses correspond rather closely with the phenomena accompanying a great volcanic explosion: the sudden change of day to night, thunder and hail, a rain of fire, epidemics, water the color of blood. The wise Moses took advantage of this unleashing of the

elements and led his people out of the Pharaoh's country. The miraculous crossing of the Red Sea—according to Galanopoulos—was possible due to the waves of the tsunami, which move at a speed of hundreds of kilometers an hour. Considering that the rise of the waters at the time of the volcanic eruption on Thera attained a dizzying height of dozens of meters at the center of the vortex, this could have caused the movement of water mass at reservoirs hundreds of kilometers from the site of the catastrophe.

The finds on Thera had such large reverberations that they gave rise to a new theory in Atlantology. True, many take the seekers of Atlantis for mild-mannered maniacs, and Atlantology itself for a dubious science, since for so many centuries it has been unable to find the object of its study. But taking into account that we live in an era of realized fantasies, it is worth devoting a moment of our time to this question as well.

Plato is to blame for everything. In two dialogues written toward the end of his life he tells a "very strange story, but true in every respect" about a drowned continent; a story one of the seven sages, Solon, was said to have heard from Egyptian priests.

The *Timaeus* and *Critias* belong to the most enigmatic of the Athenian philosopher's works and have provoked many commentaries, glosses, and explications. Both dialogues were probably inspired by Pythagorean but perhaps also Egyptian and Oriental sources. They are great poems on the universe, its creation and early history, but the sober-minded Aristotle already thought they were creatures of Plato's fantasy, devoid of any scientific foundation. This does not bother Atlantologists. They only make certain corrections to the chronology and topography of the alleged Atlantis.

Some of them think—clearly under the influence of the discoveries on Thera—that it was in the Aegean Sea. Plato himself situates it in the Atlantic Ocean, but supporters of an Atlantis-in-the-Aegean theory say that the Ancients' geography was full of lacunas, contradictions, and misleading information. But how to accommodate Plato's claim that

Atlantis was a continent rather than an island, larger than Libya and Asia combined, and that the catastrophe took place nine thousand years before Solon's visit to Egypt? The answer given to the latter question: that Solon, not being that fluent in hieroglyphics, read the symbol for a hundred as the symbol for a thousand. If we then consider that according to tradition the Greek sage visited Egypt in 570 B.C., let us add nine hundred years and we get 1470 B.C. and this is the approximate date of the fall of Minoan culture and the explosion of the volcano on Thera. But can we take these Platonic millennia or centuries so literally; don't they simply mean "a long time ago"?

In the archaeological museum in Heraklion there is a disc called the Phaestos disc, which I spent a long time studying; I even made a sketch of it in the secret hope that I might be touched by grace and bring off what so many scholars failed to do. This daydream was so intense that one night I dreamt that I was to announce the results of my revelatory discovery. I stood at a high lectern with a circle of prominent scholars before me —including Humboldt, Schliemann, and…all of them from the nineteenth century, brownish as in daguerrotypes; in the first row I saw my gymnasium Latin teacher who must have been invited to witness the triumph of his brilliant pupil; they were all looking at me, only my teacher had his eyes fixed on the ground. I understood why only when I took out my notes and laid them out in front of me—they were white, terrifyingly blank pages, without any mark, without a single spot; I bowed and stood there silent, then bowed again and continued to say nothing for an even longer time, until whispers and stifled laughter reached me from the auditorium. I took flight suppressing a cry of terror and tore through meadows, bogs, ditches filled with water, woods, until I awoke, soaked, on the bank of consciousness. From that time I forbade myself all dreams of deciphering the Phaestos disc, I even stopped thinking about it, or if I did it was with spite—that it was a forgery, a malicious practical joke by some unhinged archaeologist.

In fact the Phaestos disc, one more Cretan riddle, is a plate of burnt clay in the shape of a not quite symmetrical circle, 2 centimeters thick and with a radius of 16 centimeters. This

plate is covered on both sides with hieroglyphic marks running spirally. To add to the difficulty, the hieroglyphs differ from the known but as yet undeciphered hieroglyphic script of the Minoans. It seems they were the precursors of Gutenberg, as each sign is made with a separate stamp, a prototype of a font.

The Phaestos disc was found in 1908, in the ruins of the palace. Some scholars think it is a relic of the Middle Minoan period on Crete, others maintain it is an import from Asia Minor. 45 separate signs have been distinguished on the discus. They are very distinct and represent human heads, whole figures, instruments, dishes, birds, flowers, fish, and a bunch of ideograms difficult to define: dotted fields, squares, geometric figures, wavy lines. Every so often the signs are interrupted by a vertical line, but we don't know if these are punctuation marks.

The French researcher Marcel F. Homet, basing his view on a certain similarity between the Phaestos hieroglyphs and South American native rock carvings, concluded that the Cretan relic is neither more nor less than a list of the last inhabitants of Atlantis, containing a description of the catastrophe and the fate of the few who came out of it alive. Serious scholars, however, count M. Homet's theory among the fairy tales.

VII

IT IS ALMOST TIME to leave Crete. Never before have I raked the dust of history so patiently, never have I gulped down ancient stones so greedily, and so the contours of time, of past and present, have begun to erode. Only in these two elements can man truly live to the full; I postponed the date of my departure, more frugally than ever dividing my melting drachmas, to trick fate out of one more day, two more days, telling myself that Crete is not only Heraklion and Knossos, that I need to see much more than that, because to see means to believe, and I wanted to believe in the reality of the Great Mother, of Evans, and Ida's snowy top, and lemons, which were just then ripening in the Messara valley.

I made my way around in eternally packed buses, with folk melodies trickling unevenly like pebbles from crackly loudspeakers, I wended my way in those boxes of noise from the Bay of Miravel to the promontory of Spanda and from north to south from the Aegean to the Libyan Sea. I visited many places, including Mallia with its remains of a Minoan palace, Gournia, that poor man's Pompeii, as it has been so aptly called, Gortynia, where the scraps of many cultures were found as never before on an island together with visible traces of the Romans, a tablet of laws written on a wall in confident antiqua, the remnants of the royal palace at Hagia Triada and Crete's most beautiful ruin—Phaestos.

Praise be to the Italian archaeologists entrusted with Phaestos. It is a pure ruin, without pretentious reconstructions, the complete antithesis of Knossos. I was guided through it by Alexandros, the same whom Henry Miller described in his best book, the *Colossus of Maroussi.* I have no doubt that after his long life, Alexandros will become the patron saint of guides, *Sanctus Cicerone.* He works miracles, resurrecting life from stone and enthusiasm from the most blasé visitors.

"In our palace," he says, "the rooms were low, because the Minoans were short, like me. I'm a Minoan." He smiles all the time, but when he says this, he becomes totally serious. "Our sanitary equipment here was no worse than in Knossos. I would even say it was better." And he is already taking us to the remains of the sewer trenches, telling us to lean forward, touch the stone and coo in admiration. At the end he leads us to the top of the great stairs and orders silence.

So we stand silent at the top of the stairs. It is a solemn moment. Alexandros sticks a finger in the air and points to the left. We all turn our heads: the valley leading to the sea, and behind it Mount Ida with a white cap of snow on its peak. "That's where the Cave of Zeus was. Halfway up the mountain." And there it is, halfway up the mountain—a dark blue spot like the splinter of a mirror. Alexandros points in front of himself: "And there Zeus was born." That is already not as clear. The place of birth is veiled by a chain of mountains. That's why you have to believe.

Ah, Alexandros, Alexandros, if you were always at my side I could move mountains. I would teach the petty and self-satisfied obedience to the gods. We might do extraordinary things—make a covenant across time, reconcile the dead with the living.

Now Alexandros stands at the top of the stairs. We are all silent. I can see that Alexandros is a charioteer. The stone chariot of his Phaestos halted for a moment.

AGAIN I SIT IN little Venizelou square in Heraklion looking at the Morosini fountain. I order my notes and impressions. I would like to answer the question of what Crete means to me, what moved me most here.

There is no path to the world but the path of compassion.

The remains of the empire, of great castles and capitals do not move one as much as the ruins of Minoan palaces. It seems that the hubris of great civilizations was foreign to the inhabitants of ancient Crete. They did not tempt fate. They strove to endure in their separateness and in their delusional sense of security. It is as if the unleashed elements were too great and cruel in proportion to what they destroyed. Their ruins are the ruins of a cradle, the ruins of a child's room.

Departure

A DOZEN OR SO kilometers east of Heraklion is the airport —a big meadow without goats or sheep.

The plane flies over the sea the whole way; from up high it looks hard as carbonized rock. We drag a gray shadow like an anchor behind us. The Cyclades. The islands below are like the tawny skins of wild animals flung on the waves.

ATTEMPT AT A DESCRIPTION OF THE GREEK LANDSCAPE

For Magda and Zbyszek Czajkowski

I WENT TO GREECE to encounter the landscape. One can make a perfectly good study of Greek art in European museums. The humid night on board a ship sailing the classic route from Brindisi[1] to Piraeus was filled with questions about the color of the sky, the sea, and the mountains.

I thought it would be a continuation of the Italian landscape. But by morning, when the first islands began to appear on the horizon, then the steep coast of the Peloponnesus and finally the Bay of Corinth, I understood that it was given to me to know something I would not be able to compare with anything else.

It is a landscape that by its very own nature defies description. It is impossible to find a place that would be even an approximation to a sum, a synthesis of the traveler's visual experience, impossible to cut from that tangle of blue sky, mountain, water, air, and light a single view and say: that is Greece. Of course, you can say that is the way it always is with a varied landscape, but here we have to do not only with a wealth of variety. One of the most powerful experiences I kept having in Greece was the sensation of movement, as if my eyes were constantly being opened to the painful drama of the earth's birth.

Mountains ought to saturate the landscape with a majestic silence. But unlike the Alps, we have here a hectic piling up, a

clash of land masses, sharp ravines, sudden passes, and between them valleys, rarely broad, most often narrow, serpentine. Force and violence have written their names on the precipitous slopes.

The geologist says: the limestone and dolomite prevalent in Greece are evidence that for hundreds of millions of years the land was submerged by the sea called Tethys. This sea divided the northern land mass called Angara (Central Europe, Asia, North America) from the southern mass Gondwana (Africa, South Asia, and South America). The Mediterranean is what is left of ancient Tethys.

From its depths the Greece of today rose up by force of volcanic explosions. The contours of the lands and seas were only formed in the last age of the earth's history. It is one of the most seismically unstable regions of our globe. On the peninsula and on the Hellenic islands there have been over 300 earthquakes in recorded history.

You see the sea from almost every elevation. It closes off the horizon with a flat line which should have a calming effect. But even when it is peaceful, when it is not assaulting the land, its deep color reminds us that it is an abyss covered with a mirror.

Whoever comes here with the palette of an Italian landscape painter will have to abandon all sweet colors. The earth is burnt by the sun, parched from drought, it has the color of bright ash, sometimes of gray violet or violent red. The landscape is not only before your eyes but beside you, behind you, you feel its intrusion, its siege, its intense presence. Tall trees are rare; occasionally a loftly oak—the Zeus of trees. Clumps of greenery cling to the slopes, small bushes stubbornly struggling to survive. On the roads, on gentler hills, the wild olive tree with its slender leaves mobile as fingers, silver-green underneath. Low against the earth, thyme and mint—the aromas of heat.

Between light and shadow a sharp line cut by a diamond, without the whole scale of gray and half-shadow known from the countries of the North. The Greeks covered the stones of their temples with murals in order not to go blind. But before

their sanctuaries rose up in the sun, Greece's heart was already beating under the earth. One must begin one's wanderings from caves, labyrinths, and crevices.

This will be an attempt to describe the landscape and its apparently direct results.

I

THE VILLAGE IS CALLED Psychro. It is situated at the foot of one of the highest mountains on Crete—Dikte[2]. The guide, a tall dark peasant, awaits the few arrivals; he leads them by a sharp serpentine trail up the mountain, up to the place where the cave opens that according to legend is where Zeus was born.

The sun-drenched mountain slope suddenly opens into a hole as black as coal. The guide lights candles. The downward gradient is steep. After only a few steps the darkness thickens; one is seized by the cold and the penetrating stony moisture. Black stalactites—the colonnade of a mad architect—narrow corridors and crannies strengthen an impression of the moist, biological mystery of birth.

The cave is divided into two parts, of which the larger was the site of sacrifice. There are remains of something in which archaeologists can make out traces of an altar. Natural steps lead to the other part, laid out a few dozen meters deeper, at the bottom of which dark water has frozen. Here *ex vota* have been discovered which date to the Minoan and Mycenean ages.

When you descend all the way down to the small subterranean lake, which reflects the candlelight as solidly as black marble, the darkness thickens, tightens around the body, more and more material, suffocating, until you want to scare off its menacing presence with a cry.

Why was this place of all places chosen as the cradle of the god of the heavens? Shouldn't he have been born on a mountaintop or in a wide valley filled with sunlight? Why was his origin stuffed into the depths of a cavern?

Greek religion was a synthesis of earth and heaven. It absorbed what came before the Greeks—Cretan, Asiatic, Egyptian elements. It assimilated the old Mediterranean tradition of agricultural cults with their powerful mark of mysticism, their whole pleiade of earth goddesses and Great Mother—patroness of fertility and the harvest. Zeus—seemingly the most Greek of the Greek gods—was not free of these influences. Born in a cleft of earth, raised by the nymph or goat Amalthea, he was initially a secondary god. His later cult and enthronement on Olympus is connected with the new Greek religious current introduced by shepherds (not farmers). A feature of that cult was, if not the disappearance, then certainly the limitation of the mystical agrarian principle, and a domination of male gods, the transference of the seat of the world rulers from the depths of the earth to the heavenly spheres. The Cave of Zeus (*Diktaíon antron*) is the dark cradle of a new world religion.

To leave the cave is to be liberated from oppressive darkness. Before one's eyes lies the great Lassithi plain—the joyous geometry of cultivated fields. The outstretched canvas wings of windmills like white sunflowers turn in the sun. An intense shimmering of white, yellow, green. The valley of life is surrounded on all sides by a chain of barren mountains.

II

ON MAPS EPIDAUROS IS placed—God knows why—on the sea coast. In fact it is a three-hour walk away from the coast. Before you enter the sanctuary of Asklepios you have to pass through a green forecourt, a garden of tall trees and luscious green grass implausible in this burnt country. There is probably not a corner of land in all of Greece better suited to be the site of a cult of the most kindly god of Greek Olympus, who, as the sculptors portray him, smiled and laid a healing hand on the bodies of the afflicted, the sick and those seeking aid.

The sanctuary is expansive; on thick grass in the shade of trees the remains of altars, porticoes, and temples are strewn.

The most interesting and enigmatic structure is the *thólos*[3]—placed near the temple of Asklepios. It was a richly ornamented rotunda in multicolored limestone and marble, held up by two circles of columns (26 Doric columns on the outside and 14 Corinthian columns forming the inner circle). The true enigma is the deep labyrinth under the thólos, its convoluted subterranean part.

A cross-section of this labyrinth reminds one of a molehill. It is known that amphibians and subterranean animals were for the Greeks an embodiment of chtonic powers. Before Asklepios took on his gentle human face, he was a mole. The labyrinth under the thólos in sunny Epidauros is the dark root of this myth.

The ritual to which the sick awaiting the god's help were subjected was straightforward. After making a sacrifice they were led to the temple, where they were supposed to spend the night on the still bloody hides of the sacrificial animals. The most important part of the treatment was incubation—a waiting for sleep, during which the god entered into direct contact with the patient. Beforehand fasting and abstinence were recommended, to ensure maximally favorable conditions of incubation.

The number of sick who visited Epidauros at any given time could reach eight hundred. Not until the third century B.C. was the portico—serving as a kind of forecourt to the temple—enlarged. The nearest village was an hour's travel away. Pilgrims then slept *sub Iove*[4]. Only in the second century B.C. was an inn built for them.

The writings of ancient authors do not say much about Epidauros. The classics were not very interested in personal matters, and they do not seem to have paid much attention to the little ailments of little people. We are left with the immedate sources—*ex vota*—thanksgiving inscriptions, but the most recent scholars maintain a great reserve toward them.

For it is hard to believe—even with all the respect due to miracles—in the five-year pregnancy of Cleo, ending in a happy issue, after which the daughter thus brought into the world bathed herself in the spring and, to top it all off, went

for a stroll with her gladdened mother. It is easier to believe in the cure of a mute girl, who gave a cry of fright at the sight of a snake and began to talk. (Epidauros and its surroundings are plentiful in big gentle yellow snakes—helpers of Asklepios—that slither around everywhere and nest in the incubatorium). The tales told by the grateful inscriptions are not without humor and charm. One slave smashed his master's favorite bowl. Terrified, he made his way to Epidauros with the shards of the valuable dish in a bag. And that time the good Asklepios healed a bowl.

Probably the accidents and illnesses of Asklepios's patients were varied and not always delusional. It happened that people fell gravely ill, as a silent gallery of human body parts sculptured in stone and offered to the god testifies.

It seems right to assume that the smiling Asklepios's therapy was based on a sensible combination of dietetics and hygiene that had nothing to do with magic. The god recommended people to protect their heads from the sun, drink milk with honey as a laxative, go for walks, keep the body clean. "Klinatas of Thebes," says one of the inscriptions, "had a vast number of fleas on his whole body; he went to the hieron[5], where he had the following vision: he dreamt that the god undressed him, took a brush and cleaned his body of fleas. The next day Klinatas left the incubatorium cured."

It is generally thought that Greek medicine was born in a temple. But there is much evidence to suggest that both disciplines—miracle-working and medical science—developed independently, in conditions of what one might call peaceful coexistence. After all, Hippocrates, the precursor of psychotherapy, who warned people of charlatans, recommended sacrifices and prayers, especially against melancholia and nightmares. The Asklepion[6] in Epidauros had an array of branches in many Greek cities and we know that in the Athenian branch, priest and doctor worked side by side. No, Aristophanes can't be right to laugh at Greek physicians. Comedy and its indispensable exaggeration is not the best source of information on the problems of the age. Asklepios was not the god of charlatans, that much is certain.

From Greece the cult of Asklepios migrated to Rome, where it was subject to vulgarization and contamination by the magical practices of Egypt and Asia. It received its first pure form—though this seems paradoxical—in Christian times. The graves of martyrs began to serve the function of incubators. The names changed, but the method employed by the saints—Tekla of Seleucis, John of Egypt, and Cosmo and Damian—remained fundamentally the same.

In Epidauros one finds the finest theater of the ancient world. Its place right next to the temple of Asklepios appears to be evidence of the healing role of Greek drama.

No one managed better than the Greeks to make architecture part of the landscape, its complement and crown. If the temple can be compared to a grove of trees, the theater is reminiscent of a rocky hollow. The architect did not grove into nature with blunt geometry and cold scales. The theater in Epidauros, its back leaning against the side of a mountain, is a work worthy of the Parthenon.

To avoid monotony of rhythm, subtle optical corrections were used here, much as on the Acropolis. The half circle of the audience is divided into two parts by a passageway called the *diazoma.* The upper part of the audience seats lean at a different angle, steeper than the lower part. In turn, the lower part of the *koilon*[7] does not form a concentric circle in relation to the orchestra[8], as if the intention were to soften the meeting of two similar geometrical figures.

The guides rip paper and whisper in the half circle of the stage to demonstrate the perfect acoustics of the construction. When it quiets down, you have to plunge into the hot stone and abandon yourself to the eternal festival of mountains, trees, and clouds. A few dozen kilometers away you can see the Argolian plain, rumpled with hills becoming gentler with the presentiment of the nearby sea.

III

“HERE IS MYCENAE[9] RICH in gold and the blood-stained palace of the Pelopides.”

The remains of the gold are now in the museum in Athens. The palace is more like a gloomy fortress. Only blood and stones are left. When the avenue suddenly makes a turn, the Greek capital of crime rises up before one’s eyes. Even if we carry but a modest load of mythological memory, Mycenae makes the irresistible impression of a place haunted by tragedy.

The acropolis has the shape of a clumsily drawn triangle with a foundation about two hundred meters high and sides three hundred meters long, erected on a hump of earth, surrounded by Cyclopian walls. On both sides steep gorges separate the fortress from the bare neighboring slopes.

The whole gives the impression of a stern immensity, although Mycenae’s strength does not lie in gigantic dimensions. The violent sculpture of the terrain makes everything look bigger than it really is. The landscape is wild, closed in on itself. The sky, ripped by the tops of mountains, hangs over Mycenae like a solidified cloud of misfortune.

The Cyclopian walls are a masterpiece of construction; they have withstood history’s intruding hordes for three and a half thousand years. Their name is apt, because they seem more a work of nature than of man. They look like cliffs carried by the forehead of a glacier into this narrow, cleft valley, closed off on two sides by mountains.

The anonymous builders of the Mycenaean walls were certainly architects of genius. They had a knowledge of the nature of stone for which one cannot find many comparisons. The blocks only seem uncut, their sides are uneven. The crevices are filled with smaller stones which ensure that the construction has elasticity, a natural musculature, which explains the mystery of its longevity.

Genius loci describes exactly what we know about the rulers of Mycenae.

Bands of Achaians, the first Indo-European invaders of Hellas, began to reach Greece from 2000 B.C. They quickly

conquered the Peloponnesian peninsula. Their wolfish appetites drove them farther south—to Crete, which dazzled the barbarians. A hybrid civilization emerged, linking elements as alien as fire and water—the Nordic and the Mediterranean. Virtually all of the *art mineur* of Mycenae is copied from Aegean art. Refined goldsmiths' work with masterly lines, rhytons with dove motifs (in a place which make you think of vultures), rustling necklaces of goldleaf—it all evokes the sweetness of Mycenaean feudal life. For that reason you have to enter deep into the ring of thick walls, smashed houses, the cramped and probably dark palace, the grim circular burial place inside the fortress, to grasp the abyss that lies between this citadel dragged down from the North and the sunny palaces of the Cretans.

The Achaians undertook looting expeditions on a truly Norman scale, taking in Asia Minor (not just Troy, for even Hittite texts preserve their name), Crete, Italy. They returned with livestock, gold, and slaves. They slammed the Gate of Lions, whose bas-relief could frighten off anyone who came seeking justice. It has been rightly observed that the map of Greek heroic myths (the causes of war underwent a poetic sublimation in mythology) is in exact accordance with the Mycenaean centers.

When dusk falls, it's best to sit by the road leading to Agamemnon's grave (a stone beehive of cut rock) and cast another eye on the Cyclopian walls and the piled-up ruins of Mycenae. Night descends from the mountains, but the nest of the Atreides still glows with the reddish color of ancient gold and ancient blood.

IV

SO THE GREEK LANDSCAPE spoke to me in the voice of myth and tragedy, filled with pathos. That was the dominant impression. The importunate presence of the naked earth, of strongly sculptured rocky masses, is strengthened by a scanty cloak of vegetation. Great big trees—poplar, yew, oak—grow in the valleys, but everywhere the forest draws back before an

offensive of small prickly bushes which can weather everything.

We know from historical reports that the now bald mountainsides of Crete were once covered with forests of cedar and cypress. The environs of Olympia were rich in poplars, but they fell victim to a rule saying they were the only tree that could be used in sacrifices. The Greek landscape of today is therefore wilder and more devoid of greenery than it was in ancient times.

But even so, it is not without its small corners of retreat—groves in which one can imagine Socrates conversing with Phaedrus. Even in the middle of Athens, a city filled with hollering and feverish pedestrian traffic, you can turn off the busy Leophoros Dioniziou Areopagitou, which runs along the foot of the Acropolis, and plunge into the crooked paths of the Hill of Muses. It's good to come here in the evening and wander amid the myrtle, laurel, and cypress. The trees are not very big, no taller than an average man, and in the dusk they are so anthropomorphic that you feel like greeting them, stopping and chatting with them.

In no other country have I ever experienced this strange sense of fraternizing with nature, the natural ease with which nature transforms itself into human shapes. That is why it seems to me that the metamorphoses of trees into dryads were not so much due to the Greeks' extravagant imagination as to quick observation and accurate reading of signals sent by the surrounding world.

Not far from Athens, in the direction of the promontory of Sounion, there is one of the oldest Attic sanctuaries—Brauron. A road leads through fields and dissolves into sand, which is probably why this locality is rarely visited by tourists, who with each year lose more of the character of pilgrims.

At the feet of the Brauron Acropolis there is a portico in the shape of the letter π. The Doric columns of light gold sandstone are not very high in proportion to the low hills of the surrounding area; with the smell of harvest and the cicadas, they create an odd atmosphere: a sanctuary in a wasteland.

Next to the portico, which is the dominating construction and encloses an architectural whole, fragments were dug up of two small temples—to Artemis and Iphigenia—and a priestess's abode. Herodotus relates that every four years a bizarre ceremony took place here. Young girls, dressed in saffron-colored robes, were sacrificed to the goddess. They went by the curious name of she-bears. The ancients explain the ceremony by the fact that at the dawn of time a bear devoted to Artemis was killed at Brauron, in reply to which the vengeful goddess sent a pestilence onto the area. The sacrifice of girls was intended to placate the goddess of the woods.

This interpretation does not go very deep. The excavations of recent times, which have thrown up the remains of a prehistoric settlement, permit us to conjecture that the ceremony at Brauron was a distant echo of the totemic rites of some pre-Greek clan whose guardian animal was the bear.

A bear in Greece? Any remaining representatives of the species live in the high mountains of the north—modern Greece seems extraordinarily poor in fauna.

In the first half of the nineteenth century during engineering works in the town of Pikermia near Athens they stumbled upon…an animal cemetery! The discovery became a sensation for naturalists all over Europe.

On the basis of this find, scientists came to the conclusion that in the time immediately preceding recorded history, Greece was a region of unusually bounteous and varied fauna. Animals of temperate climes lived here—goats, deer, bears—alongside animals of hot climes like antelopes, elephants, hyenas, rhinoceroses, monkeys, as well as species characteristic of cold climates like the musk ox. Nor was there a lack of powerful predators like the striped tiger and lion—so often represented in sculpture; they were not, as one might think, purely an import of the imagination.

The huge cemetery in Pikermia had resulted from some gigantic forest fire from which herds of animals fled only to perish, tumbling down the steep inclines of the gorges.

In Euripides's *Iphigenia of Tauris* we find a reference to Brauron. The text goes: "And you, Iphigenia, will be the keyholder[10] of the temple on the holy hills of Brauron, where you will be buried after your death. They will offer you splendid fabrics, left by women who died in childbirth."

In Euripides's time, Iphigenia was no more than a mortal heroine. But earlier she was counted among the heavenly beings as the goddess of fertility. She gave up her place to Artemis, much as Helen, first a goddess, was degraded to the role of Menelaus's wife—the cause of the unfortunate Trojan War. What was the meaning of these dethronings? Probably there was a new need to codify legends in the times immediately preceding the birth of tragedy, and an array of local gods had to yield to general Greek gods.

Brauron has the indolent atmosphere of old, abandoned country estates. A spring wells up from the side of the acropolis and the quick stream disappears under the portico's foundations. Although the layers of many legends and beliefs from the dawn of time lie piled upon the Brauron sanctuary, it seems that this temple was originally built in honor of water—in a country where a spring is a divine revelation.

V

SET SWINGING PAST THE bounds of the imagination and far past the bounds of any description—the landcape of Delphi. Many lovely things have been said about it: "A place that possesses mystery, grandeur and a tremor of the divine" "amid a colossal layering of rock, temples reign supreme in a sublime tragic wasteland" "a vast decoration of earth tortured by the wrath of the god of thunderbolts." These small and common phrases are like a ring held up to the horizon; no one can contain the splendor of this place in words.

Man climbed to the mountain wilds to wrest a secret from the gods. He clung to the last slope of Parnassus—invisible from here—which was so savage that to this day Dionysus wanders about there, unafraid. The rocks called the Phaedriades fall almost perpendicularly from a height of 300

meters. From a narrow crevice the Castalian Spring bursts forth. A path has been trodden right over the gorgelike ravine of Pleistos, leading westward into the mountains, and southward in the direction of the Bay of Itea. Far away, very far down, you can see the sea, shining like a snakeskin.

It is difficult to trace the origins of the fame and significance of Delphi, the spiritual capital of Greece. Some scholars hold that the institution of tyranny played a part in it. At moments of crisis, the oracle's authority buttressed a tottering throne. It is characteristic that these were not only Hellenic rulers but also barbarian kings from Phrygia and Anatolia—Gyges, Croesus, Midas. The latter endowed Delphi with a golden throne around the year 740. Was this a sign of piety? Maria Delcourt rightly notes that an Asian prince treated a god as a mighty ruler, whom he had to bribe.

By the age of Homer, Delphi was famous and wealthy. A myth teaches us that originally the place was called Pytho and was governed by Gaia, the goddess of the earth. Apollo then felt a desire to have a temple here. Before that could happen he had to kill the female dragon of Pytho—the embodiment of chthonic powers. A Homeric hymn from the end of the seventh century B.C. describes the wrestling-match of these two elemental powers of Greek religion.

Not far from the beautifully coursing spring, the god, son of Zeus, killed the dragon with his mighty bow and arrow—a huge beast, which had inflicted many injuries on people and their thin-legged sheep. Whoever met it was lost, up to the day that Apollo—the Archer God—shot it with his mighty arrow. Racked by terrible pain the beast uncoiled on the earth, emitting a great groan…and gave up the ghost, exhaling its last breath from a bloody throat. Then Phoebus Apollo spake proudly: "Now you will decay[11] in the earth, which nurtures humankind."

The Homeric hymn goes on to say that the victor set out to find priests to be guardians of his new temple and new religion. He swam to Crete in the shape of a dolphin. Since then the place has been called Delphi.

The second part of the myth is unclear and some read it as proof of a Minoan influence on the site of this new cult. Nowadays it is thought that the Apollonian religious revolution took place in the eighth century B.C. or just before that, in a time when Crete had been a part of the Greeks' domain for several centuries. In close proximity to Apollo's sanctuary in a place called Marmaria, the earth divinities retained their sovereignty; this is shown by sphinxes and other symbols alien to Phoebus. Most probably Pytho was the site of an oracle before Apollo arrived.

Although so many books have been written on the Delphic oracle and all the scholars emphasize its great importance, both its functioning and its political role still remain in the realm of guesses and hypotheses. Emil Bourguet writes: "Regardless whether it was the last pagans[12] or the first Christians who for very different reasons wanted all traces to disappear of what might be called the mechanism and the material aspect of the oracle—the result is the same: the last Pythia took its secrets with her to her grave."

As the bride of a god, the Pythia initially had to be a virgin. Later she was chosen from among married women who had lived a blameless life. The oracle was consulted once a year, then once every three months, but in the period of Delphi's greatest authority, extraordinary consultations were also known to take place. The number of prophetesses also grew, but never exceeded three.

The usual representation of a priestess of Apollo: a woman with her hair loose and lips open sits on a tripod seat, intoxicated by fumes emanating from the earth. This hysterical vision has little in common with reality. No cleft in the rock has been found at Delphi from which those overpowering vapors were supposed to have risen. The whole legend can be ascribed to later Christian interpreters, Origen and John Chrysostom, who wished to give an enemy institution the diabolical smell of sulphur.

The consultation of the oracle took place in the part of the temple called *adyton* (inaccessible place). The persons who were there to consult, cleansed themselves in the Castalian

spring, made the requisite payment and stood by while a sacrifice was made. If the sacrifice turned out to be propitious, they went into the adyton. The Pythia, unseen behind a curtain, gave answers to the questions put to her.

The proverbial opacity of the prophecies demanded the aid of exegetes. Thus the sybyl's responses were always interpreted. Delphi was a complicated institution, whose honorary president—if one can call it that—was Apollo, but alongside the Pythia's helpers, called holy priests, ambassadors of particular states were also active, mediating between the gods' seat and their native town.

Unfortunately, we know neither the functions, nor the hierarchy of particular dignitaries, nor even the names of these intermediaries. Inquisitive researchers have wrested from this immemorial conspiracy the name of an Athenian seer and exegete from the fifth century B.C. His name was Lampon and he held office in Delphi, but we don't know if he was accredited or acted on his own authority. However, we know of him that he played an important role in declaring himself on the side of Pericles against Thucydides. A ram with one horn appeared in the vicinity of Delphi. Lampon declared—and gave suitable publicity to his declaration—that soon the Athenian state would cease oscillating between two political systems and that Thucydides, head of the aristocratic party, would have to cede to Pericles.

No general conclusion can be drawn from this single fact, even that Delphi always supported democratic forces. Aristotle says that the ambassadors of Greek states in Delphi were the mainstays of tyranny. As a result of the fragmentary sources and to the despair of lovers of certain knowledge (even in the sphere of godly affairs) we are condemned to hypotheses and every thesis can be countered with powerful arguments.

The weight of the questions examined by the oracle varied: they ranged from personal matters to questions of war and peace. Pindar cites the following story, which may be just a joke. One Battos, a citizen of the island Thera[13], suffering from a speech defect (stuttering) consulted the divinity as to what to do to rid himself of this troublesome ailment. The

Pythia answered that he was to emigrate to Africa and found a colony there. The obedient Battos set off for Africa, met a lion in the desert and sudden terror made him speak fluently. Whether or not this story is true, it is certain that Delphi supported the expansion of Greek colonization and did not hesitate even to use stutterers to that end.

The most famous case—thanks to Herodotus—was that of the oracle in the dramatic days preceding the second Persian war. Panic seized all Greek cities. The Pythia's answer to the Athenians' question as to what to do did not lend them courage in the least.

"Unfortunates, why do you not act?[14] Leave your households and the high hills of your circular city. Not a head nor a body will survive; everything will be reduced to a pitiful state, consumed by fire and the violence of Ares on the Syrian chariot. He will destroy many other castles, not only yours; he will leave many gods' temples to the fury of the fire, the sight will send down fear and trembling, for black blood will flow from their roofs as the promise of inevitable ruin. But come out of the holy sites and answer misfortune with courage."

Apart from the last sentence, in which there sounds a note of pagan tragedy (as we would call it now), the vision of total annihilation would terrify even the bravest. On the advice of Themistocles the oracle was consulted for a second prophecy, which was enigmatic: a wooden rampart would save Athens. A fleet was built and its victory at Salamis indeed saved Greece.

Various interests and political forces rubbed up against each other in Delphi, but the claim would appear exaggerated that the spiritual capital of Hellas was traditionally conformist and in times of crisis would speak Persian, Spartan, or finally Macedonian, allying itself always with those who were or seemed the strongest. No doubt the oracle was abused, but it is now difficult to determine what was fact and what was the fantasy of interpreters, or of people who tried to justify themselves by invoking the god's voice. For example, Argos and the Cretan towns that gave up on participating in the defense of Greece covered themselves with the prophecy

advising against a war with the Persians, but plain knowledge of human nature leads one to assume that the decisive motive to give up was common fear rather than the blind faith of simpletons.

The religious and moral role of the spiritual center of Hellas causes interpreters a great many problems. In general it can be said that the capital of Greek religion showed great common sense, supporting foreign cults among other things, and applying the rational principle of tolerance. But exceptions to this principle also occurred. After Troy had been won, Ajax of Locri dishonored the priestess of Athena, Cassandra, and this act was to be expiated by sending the Trojans two Locrian maidens annually for a thousand years; the girls were surrounded with universal hatred and led miserable lives, locked in Athena's temple, not leaving the place and not speaking to anyone to the end of their days. In the fourth century B.C. the Locrians decided to stop this barbarian custom. But Delphi ordered the continuation of the sacrifice, which was a kind of collective punishment, extended for generations.

It is more than probable that the humanization of Greek religion was brought about more by tragic poetry than by the priests. It was Aeschylus and Sophocles who fought with power, dignity, and courage against the custom of blood revenge, which weighed so heavily on Greek life. Their feel for the essence of religion—dispenser of forgiveness—was far greater than that of the official representatives of the cult.

Delphi is like a great stone staircase hewn out of a cliff. The sacred road winds with sharp bends around an extraordinary crowding of votive chapels, porticoes, treasure houses, and temples. The Doric temple of Apollo holds sway over this piling up of buildings. Higher up, on the highest elevation—the stadium and theater.

Like the Gothic cathedrals, Delphi was a collective labor. When in the sixth century B.C. the temple of Apollo was wasted by fire, an international subscription was organized. The Delphic priests wandered from city to city, collecting donations. They did not leave out Egypt. The Pharaoh Amasis

gave a thousand talents toward the cause. And when in turn that temple was destroyed by an earthquake, offerings toward a new construction began to flow in from all parts of Greece, the poorest of the poor also contributing their proverbial obol.

Because of the temple's remoteness and its precarious placement, the costs of building, and especially of transportation, were unusually high, and only attachment to a holy site can explain the fact that the Greeks did not seek out a more convenient location. The price of a block of stone in a mine came to 60 drachmas, but on the building site it was eight times more. At that time an architect earned two drachmas a day.

Under the temple of Apollo there are *ex vota* and treasure houses—small sacred buildings also serving as storehouses for the most valuable sacrifices of the faithful, which it was safer not to leave in the open air—just in case. Here one can trace—on a miniature scale—the development of Greek architecture from the most ancient (probably the end of the seventh century B.C.) Corinthian treasure house—a simple extended chamber without divisions or architectural ornamentation—right up to the treasury of Cyrene, which is a stone lecture on the chief mathematical problems of the fourth century B.C. Hellenic geometry pays tribute to the god of measure and harmony.

The *ex vota* on the other hand are testimony to the bloody rivalry between Greek cities. They were built not so much to honor the gods but to commemorate a city's own military glory and remind its enemies of their defeat. The inhabitants of Argos dedicate their *ex vota* to the celebration of their victory over Sparta at Oinoe. When the Spartans defeated the Athenians at Aigospotamoi, *ex vota* were built and filled with statues of Spartan generals and admirals, and this right next to the *ex vota* of Athens. If we add that the material used to build these little temples of pride was derived from loot taken from conquered cities, we have the full measure of the humiliation of the conquered.

The antagonisms and eloquent examples of quarrels between cities should not obscure the fact that in spite of everything, and chiefly thanks to Delphi, Greece constituted a

spiritual unity. They came from the farthest colonies to the sacred hillsides to gain the grace of atonement under the radiant power of the one who, as Pindar says, gave us the lute and inspiration[15], he who floods our hearts with the love of peace and hatred of civil strife.

The cliffs surrounding Delphi are covered with scant greenery, they are blood red and dark blue, constantly threatening to break off. Against this dramatic background you may see in the evening the slow gliding shadow of an eagle.

Delphi—the stone crown of the Greek landscape.

VI

SPARTA OFFERS ALMOST NO aesthetic impression (really none at all). The town, once the seat of Greek power, is small, provincial, and badly built. The living wall of Spartan chests, much boasted of, has long gone under the earth. The remains of pitiful ruins, which date from later times anyway, are without a trace of grandeur or beauty. The museum is poor—just one sculpture worth notice, a Leonidas torso, looming from rough stone like an unfinished work by Michelangelo. Thucydides's prediction has come true: nothing remained of proud Sparta.

It offers no impression but it prompts reflection. They did not manage to hold back time, although the whole construction of the Spartan state and its customs constituted an attempt to hold it back. Until the very end (that is, until the defeat inflicted on Sparta by Thebes in 371 B.C.) a social abyss separated Spartiates from helots, who were excluded from the law. The helots were victims of atrocious massacres perpetrated by Spartan youth not out of hatred, but—what is worse—as a form of training, a military exercise. In that most oligarchical of Greek states, power remained in the hands of a small group of citizens. Economic activity was forbidden to the free citizens. Waging war was the only enterprise worthy of the Spartiates. The arts were under the patronage of Tyrtheus—the author of hymns and odes, the two literary genres recognized by Saint-Just many centuries later.

However, Sparta had its admirers. They were intellectuals, of course—Plato, Xenophon—who, like the Spartans, prefer a state governed by an idea to one governed by the unreliable and suspect laws of life.

VII

OLYMPIA DID NOT MAKE a great impression on me at first. The terrain is flat and heavily wooded, as it so rarely is in Greece. The famous stadium is really just a sizeable meadow. The only elevation in the vicinity is the hill of Kronos, symmetrical as a cupola and covered with a beautiful bristle of trees. The light here is soft, green, filtered by leaves and reflected from grass. The complete antithesis of the Delphic landscape.

Olympia has been the object of archaeological probing from the beginning of the eighteenth century. The Germans undertook systematic excavations. The work continues to this day. Perhaps it is the chilly scientific systemization that makes an aesthetic contemplation of Olympia difficult. Only in the museum do you feel what it really was, looking at the loveliest collection of Greek metopes and the two magnificent pediments from the temple of Zeus.

Archaeologists through the ages have been vexed by the problem that the principles of conservation and the principles of reconstruction cannot always be reconciled. In addition, for commercial reasons they have tried to open excavations to the public as early on as possible, which often hampers research. But it is surely not superstitious preciosity to say that ruins should have power to evoke. Of course I'm not talking about adding missing columns, sticking on metopes, or rebuilding vaults. The remains of Poseidon's temple on the promontory of Sounion (thanks to the excellent location—like a lighthouse—on a line of cliffs descending down to the sea) have the ideal features of an unfinished reconstruction that spurs the imagination. One visits Olympia with a guidebook in hand, as if completing a piece of homework: the Heraion was here, the altar of Zeus here, his temple (mighty drums of columns, lying

like tree trunks), and over there is Phidias's workshop. The true grace of beauty does not descend until one is in the museum.

The Games—considered the oldest in Greece—took place every four years from the beginning of July or September, and were the basis for Greek chronology from the sixth century B.C. They lasted five days, and their organization and program have been quite well known for a long time. Today's researchers try to discover the origin and decipher the secret meaning of these festivities.

The Olympic Games are certainly an echo of the pitiless struggle for power between father and son (Kronos and Zeus, Zeus and Heracles—the patrons of the games) or father-in-law and son-in-law (Oinomaos and Pelops)—the ancient theme of innumerable fables throughout the world. A candidate for kingship had to show his superiority and physical prowess—and the best, most final way to do this was to kill the opponent. At the source of disinterested athletic contests lay murder and seizure of the throne.

After the death of Patrocles, Achilles—the *Iliad* tells us—had games held. This was not merely a way of honoring a fallen hero. The festivity had a magical significance. It was about an injection of vital energy that the competitors transferred to the dead man.

The only material reward for the victor was a wreath of olive leaves—not from any old wayside olive tree, but from the *kallistefanos*[16] tree that Heracles brought from the land of the Hyperboreans. This indicates a link between the games and a cult of vegetation. Running in particular, bare feet rhythmically pounding the earth, was said to awaken the earth's slumbering powers of generation. In origin this was a ceremony in honor of Heracles—not the Dorian Heracles, the one known from legend, but his much older embodiment, the chthonic Heracles, daimon of nature.

The primordial origin of the games lay in a battle for life and death. But one should not imagine that in the Classical era, the element of risk disappeared entirely. Competition was not just a display of strength and beauty but also a game for the

highest stakes. The four-horse chariot races were especially dangerous; at the time of the Pythian Games in 462 B.C. only one made it to the finishing line in one piece. The blinding sun, the sharp turns, and the length of the course were the cause of many fatal accidents, which—as in the *corrida*—were a part of the spectacle.

Along with Delphi, Olympia was a symbol of the fraternity of all Hellenes. For the duration of the competition, ambassadors called *theoroi*[18] declared peace, and quarreling cities with differing political systems, dialects, and customs breathed deeply of the air of a fatherland recovered and held in common.

The Games were an agon, that is to say a contest or rather a battle, which was one of the essential elements of Greek civilization. A battle was said to produce not just a good or a brave man, but the best man—the hero. Olympia was, then, a school of energy and a display of personal models.

It was also a school for sculptors. The contestants lent their bodies to gods and demigods. The finest Greek artists: Phidias, Myron, Polycletes (creator of a new canon) worked for Olympia.

The Greeks had no team sports. Victory was individual, the preservation of the names of winners of the Games testify to this. In the beginning, in the eighth century B.C., they were without exception Peloponnesians, later the names of contestants from Athens, Smyrna, Thebes, Krotona, Syracuse, and Samos appear. The winner of a laurel wreath stood a good chance after his death to become a dweller on the Isles of the Blessed, cooled by an ocean breeze, where, under enormous trees festooned with flower garlands, the chosen stroll under the gentle gaze of Radamanthus and his spouse Rhea[17], reigning on the loftiest of thrones.

VIII

FOR A COMPLETE PICTURE of Greece you need an image of the islands. On the plane flying from Heraklion to Athens

you see them rising from the sea. They have ragged coasts and a tawny color, like a lion skin flung on the waves. Seen from the deck of a ship they have a human face: whitewashed houses, with flat roofs, crooked little streets, smoke, a bustle of black figures around a fishing net only just retrieved from the sea.

I chose Delos. The ship sails twelve hours from Piraeus to the island of Mykonos. It casts anchor in the open sea. A motorboat brings passengers into the small fishing port. Although I traveled at night the houses, stuck to together like a honeycomb, were emitting white steam.

Mykonos is fashionable, but due to the difficulties of communication it has fortunately not attained the status of Capri. In the morning it's best to go to the port and let your gaze wander from house to house, inwardly composing a Baroque sonnet made up of comparisons to chalk, foam, marble, Alpine snow. A true orgy of white—if the word "orgy" can be applied to that most hushed of colors.

For centuries Mykonos lived off the bounty of the sea. This is the kind of sentence found in tourist pamphlets, from which one can glean veritable pearls of applied poetry. More precisely, the inhabitants were fishermen and pirates. The town is famous for the fact that for every two houses there is a votive chapel, founded by representatives of both professions, which tells us that here the sea can indeed be perilous, and coveting one's neighbor's goods—an irrepressible urge.

From the port you go to Delos on a rickety motorboat. I have felt the wrath of Poseidon; to tell the truth, it wasn't full-blown wrath but simply griping and a bad mood. It was enough, however, to persuade me the Aegean is not a puddle.

The owners of the motorboat gave tourists a fair warning by hanging near the rubbish bin an ancient sign covered with illegible writing, from which a philologist, someone accustomed to reading hermetic texts, might conclude that this time the journey is made at the traveler's own risk.

The travelers—a group of British students—maintained a fine indifference before the adversities of fate. They unfolded

the great sheets of newspapers, which in this case were not for reading but imitated the toga Stoics used to cover their faces to hide their suffering; the Germans made eager noises in the beginning, but soon fell into a heavy melancholy; the blond, black-clad Swedish girl kept her eyes closed throughout and big, beautiful tears rolled down her face. The only crew member beside the steersman, a sailor—if the word can refer to an elderly fellow—tried to scoop out the water carried by the crashing waves with a little ladle. The experience of this difficult journey seemed to me essential for the understanding of certain episodes in the *Odyssey*.

Finally, Delos. A wasteland without cultivated fields, a rock raised up by the waves more for gulls than for people, exposed to every wind, suffused with the rhythm of the sea. It is barely 16 square kilometers. From the highest peak of Mount Kynthos, you can see the wreath of the Cyclades: Tinos, Andros, Syros, Kythnos, Serifos, Antiparos, Paros, Ios, Naxos, Amorgos, Mykonos, Ikaros. I exaggerate slightly: you don't see all these islands, but the names are so lovely that it is hard to resist naming them all. Delos lies in the middle of the Cyclades and that explains the exceptional significance of this island sanctuary, which already in the Mycenean age was a famous seat of the gods of earth, protectors of fertility and midwives. Herodotus tells of pilgrimages made here from remote Scythia.

Delos entered Greek mythology as the birthplace of Apollo and Artemis. In the beautiful Homeric Hymn, their mother Latona does not address Poseidon, who gave this stony shelter to fury-driven Hera, but the island itself. She speaks like an exiled princess to an impoverished village woman, promising her a future reward—hecatombs on the altar, wagonloads of fat meat. "Delos, if you will[19] be the seat of my son Apollo… the hands of others will nourish you."

For nine days and nine nights Latona knelt, clinging to the trunk of a sacred palm tree (a primitive birthing method) before she brought Artemis and Apollo into the world. Then the island was turned from common Ortygia (the island of pebbles) into radiant Delos. As in the case of Delphi, the change of name marked the appearance of a new cult.

Although in the course of centuries more and more new and different gods were introduced here, it was not at the expense of their predecessors, for the beautiful principle held that you should not kick your old parents out of their homes. This was without a doubt to the credit of the Ionians who, without losing any of their individuality, managed to assimilate foreign elements for their own uses. And one must not forget that the whole Apollonian triad—Latona, Artemis, and Apollo (appearing at Troy with his Asiatic bow to oppose the Greeks)—came from the East.

Many mementos survive of the epoch of archaic excellence (Delos, along with Olympia and Delphi, was among the most famed of Greek sanctuaries). A vast torso of Apollo, a group of lovely *korai* and last but not least, the renowned Terrace of Lions. Resting on their hind legs, the beasts growl at the north. They have the elongated bodies of dogs. The artists from Naxos who made the sculptures around 600 B.C. must have known lions only from hearsay.

In the sixth century B.C. Athens became one of Greece's greatest powers. It envied Delos its political and moral importance. Old myths were mobilized to prove immemorial Attic-Delian affiliations. The Athenian tyrant Pisistratus carried out a cleansing of the island, removing from it all tombs. From that time on it was not permitted either to give birth or to die on Delos. Mothers giving birth and people on their deathbeds were transported to the near island Rhenea. In the fifth century B.C. Delos and Athens were the capitals of an anti-Persian league, but the transferral of the Delian treasury to Athens marked the inevitable demise of Apollo's cradle.

The island's later Renaissance came in the Hellenistic and the Roman ages. Not losing the character of a sanctuary, Delos also became the commercial metropolis of the Aegean. After the destruction of Corinth and Carthage by the Romans in 146 B.C., the island, centrally located between Asia, Europe, and Africa, underwent a period of prosperity.

New people—new gods. Delos was always like a hospitable inn. On the gently rising slopes of the Kynthos there is a terrace of foreign deities. Three temples of Serpis, a

temple of Isis, alongside the ancient gods of the Apollonian triad and Zeus and Hera. And the new legend that Callimachus elaborates: the little Delian stream of Inopos was said to be filled with the waters of the Nile. The waters of the sacred Egyptian river on a pilgrimage to Apollo—an eloquent example of the fraternizing of religions in the declining years of the ancient world.

Delos is often compared to Pompeii. The similarity is more one of atmosphere than of appearance and details. A visit to Delos's theater district is not in the least a stroll through a cemetery. The stone-paved streets have retained the traces of carts and footsteps. On the floor of the house of Cleopatra, Dionysus or "The Dolphin," mosaics suddenly shine out. This dead city is alive. You can recognize traces of the quotidian, such as the imprint of hands on the walls of the temple and storage houses, palaces, and lupanaries.

I am aware that what I have written does not correspond to its title. Too often I have slid from the theme of landscape into the sphere of legend and history. I can't even explain to myself the connection that exists between the Greek landscape and its art and beliefs. But a powerful intuition tells me that the temples, sculpture, and myths of Greece grow organically from the earth, sea, and mountains.

The lure of description and the failures of mere descriptiveness. I haven't even managed to articulate the shape and color of an olive tree. Isn't there at least one I know in precise detail, right by the wall enclosing the palace of Minos in Knossos? I have counted each of its leaves with my eyes and I carry its exact contour within me. But you would have to be Dürer to make an object from this experience.

Describe one hillside: at the foot of the hill, the silvery ragged green of bushes. Three white houses. A vineyard reminiscent of a low elongated arbor. From the top, the blue sky dapples the greenery, but between the rows of grapevines there is a cold sapphire chill. A small square of the very vivid bronze the hornbeam's leaves turn in autumn. And finally, further up, flaking rock and scanty grass.

I wanted to describe it.

ANIMULA

To Zdzisław Najder

> I do not see Freud anywhere rising above his own psychology, and I do not know in what way he intends to liberate the sick from the suffering which plagues him as a doctor.
>
> CARL GUSTAV JUNG

I CANNOT REMEMBER EXACTLY by what accident I stumbled upon the text. In all likelihood it was at the time when I was writing an essay on the Acropolis and, as work was not going smoothly, I had sought refuge in reading, as I usually do in such circumstances. I was reading little scraps here and there, bits of commentary, articles scattered in scholarly archaeological journals, and making notes, doubting all the while that they would ever be of any use whatsoever. It was quite obvious I was deluding myself. I wanted to prove to myself that I wasn't being idle, that I wasn't falling into spiritual prostration, so I busied myself with barren, tedious make-work in the hope that from that barrenness and tedium a pure ray of inspiration would suddenly burst. Meanwhile, the drawers of every subject catalogue in every library I visited yawned with a hundred titles in various languages seeming to say: "Why do you toil? Everything has already been written, there's nothing left to contribute in this field. The only role that may fall to you is the role of a compiler."

And it was at that time of restlessness and distraction that a letter by Sigmund Freud to Romain Rolland[1] fell into my hands, a letter written on the occasion of Rolland's 70th birthday and, as is clear from its character, intended for a commemorative album being published by friends in honor of the great writer.

If one leaves aside the epistolary conventions of the opening and ending, one can treat this fragment of Freud's as an essay, the more interesting in that it shows the creator of psychoanalysis applying the method to himself, or more precisely, to a certain episode in his own life. The episode is removed from the writer by a period of thirty-odd years, and seems of the most banal kind; yet it appears in his field of consciousness—as he confesses—persistently and without any obvious reason or cause.

And so it was that in 1904, just as every year around the end of August or the beginning of September, Freud and his younger brother decide to take a holiday on the Mediterranean. This time, however, their vacation is shorter, so they do not make their traditional journey to Italy, but instead go to Trieste, from where they intend to set out for a few days on the island of Corfu. An acquaintance met unexpectedly in Trieste vigorously dissuades them from this plan. It is very hot on the islands at this time of year, he argues; an excursion to Athens would be much more agreeable. The connection by ship is particularly convenient, as it will leave the travelers three days to explore the city.

This apparently sensible and attractive proposition casts both brothers—oddly enough—into a fairly dismal mood. They wander aimlessly around town and discuss the plan for a trip to Athens without enthusiasm, finding nothing but obstacles. But when the hour comes for Lloyd's offices to open, they present themselves at a window and purchase tickets, as if forgetting for a moment all about their recent objections.

"In the afternoon of the day we arrived, when I found myself on the Acropolis and took in the landscape with a glance, a strange thought suddenly came to me: *So all of this*

really exists, just as they taught us in school." It is not a very original remark, but it expresses quite accurately what all feel to whom it is granted to stand for the first stand before the Colosseum, the statue of the Venus of Milo, or the portrait of Mona Lisa. And it is into the depths of this experience, or emotion, that Freud sinks his analytical plumb line, to show that it is not as simple and commonplace as it might appear.

In the view of the creator of psychoanalysis, what happens here is a special case of two contradictory attitudes co-existing in the same psyche and the two diametrically opposed responses to reality which result from them. Of course it is not some kind of pathological split in the self, but a disturbing fissure that appears in the personality, blurring the simple relation of perceiving subject to object. Let us examine this phenomenon more closely.

The characteristic response flowing from the first attitude is surprise that the Acropolis one sees really exists, as if one doubted its real existence before; on the other hand, the response characteristic of the second attitude is "surprise at this surprise," for the reality of the Acropolis has never been an object of doubt.

To illustrate the first attitude, Freud says that with a measure of exaggeration one can compare it to the reaction of a person walking along Loch Ness in Scotland who suddenly sees the body of the infamous monster stretched out on the bankside and is thereupon forced to admit: but it really exists, this sea monster we never believed in. The second attitude—which approaches a naive realism, we might add—accepts without reservations the testimony of the senses, and is entirely open to delight or terror unclouded by any reflection.

The most natural interpretation of those two "competing" emotions would be that there is a fundamental difference between what we experience directly and what we know from reading or hearsay, and that it's precisely the confluence of knowing and seeing that causes this contradiction in feeling and the disturbance in one's sense of reality. But Freud rejects this explanation as too banal and not really clarifying anything.

He attempts to trace back why, in Trieste, he had pushed away so attractive a prospect as a trip to Athens and why on the Acropolis the pleasure flowing from immediate contact with an architectural masterpiece had been darkened by the shadow of skepticism. “According to the testimony of my senses I am now on the Acropolis, I just cannot believe it,” or the same feeling, expressed more categorically: “What I am seeing now is not real.”

Skepticism—that’s the word. Not just a word, but in Freud’s view something much more—a psychic mechanism deeply rooted in human beings. We know this psychic mechanism well from everyday life. How often do we not push away a misfortune that befalls us with the cry: “No, that’s impossible”? We try to eliminate that part of reality, to cast it beyond our sphere of consciousness. And the author gives a fine literary example—a fragment of the long poem *Ay de mi Alhama*[2], in which this defensive reaction is clearly expressed. King Boabdil receives the news of the fall of Alhama. He knows very well that it means the end of his reign. But because he does not wish to know this, he treats the calamitous message as if it hadn’t reached him, as if rejecting it might alter the course of events.

Cartas le fueron venidas,

de que Alhama era ganada

Las cartas echó en el fuego

y al mensagero mataba.

It is easy to understand the king’s behavior and his frame of mind. He is simply trying to overcome his own impotence, to feel his power unlimited as before, so he throws the letter announcing the defeat in the fire and orders the emissaries killed. He can’t change fate, so he destroys the instruments of information.

This defense is easy to explain; one can find a whole array of examples less extreme, far-fetched, or literary, and much

closer to common experience. Freud's attention is drawn to the other side of the workings of what he claims is the same psychic mechanism: the dark, illogical side, contrary to the instinct for self-preservation. And he tries to show that a person who encounters sudden good fortune—an important prize, a triumph of fate, the hand of a secretly loved girl—will respond in the same way he does when he suffers misfortune —that is, by rejecting reality. This response is a good illustration of a common phrase that exists in nearly all European languages: "too good to be true." If a defense against bad fortune is a natural thing, why—Freud asks—do we respond with skepticism and disbelief to something that brings joy and is a stroke of luck? He calls this paradoxical predicament "defeat by reason of success" and says that people may fall ill not only as a result of failing to see their life's wishes fulfilled, but also at the moment when ardent desires are satisfied.

The self-analysis would not be complete if the aging Freud, eighty years old at the time of this essay-letter, did not return in memory to the days of his childhood and youth. He then recalls the poverty of the family home, its suffocating atmosphere filled with prohibitions, his youth with its limited possibilities and horizons.

No, he never doubted the existence of the Acropolis, but he had no hope he would ever see it with his own eyes. And on the day when this came about he felt like saying to his brother: "Remember our life when we were children? Every day we took the same path to the *gymnasium*, on Sundays we went to the Prater or drove to some place we knew outside of the city. And now here we are in Athens on the top of the Acropolis! What a long way we've come!" "And if small things may be compared to large," he goes on, "did not Napoleon I turn to his brother on the day of his coronation at Notre Dame and say: What would our father say, if he could be here?"

It is an expression of joyful pride, but it lasts scarcely a moment and is almost immediately troubled by the consciousness of the breaking of a taboo, the plucking of a forbidden fruit, a deep feeling of guilt. Guilt? Yes, answers Freud.

Toward whom? Freud's father was a merchant of small means and limited education; the Acropolis didn't mean that much to him. However, his sons outgrew him. They grew so far above his ordinary existence that they "deposed" him, and it is precisely to this assault on the fatherly ideal that one can trace the sense of guilt which robs them of the joy they are entitled to feel along with anyone who comes into contact with an artistic masterpiece.

Here one cannot help thinking of the words of Freud's great critic: "Does the father complex—which pervades the views of the Freudian school so completely—present evidence to show that Freud achieved any noteworthy liberation of man from the fatalism of the 'family romance'? This complex, in all its fanatical rigidity and exaggerated susceptibility, is a misunderstood religious function…"

In this letter-cum-treatise, written at the end of Freud's life, its author's deep pessimism is probably more manifest than in his other writings. It is not merely a cognitive pessimism, but a pessimism bearing on man's nature, his fundamental inability to achieve happiness.

I've sought to summarize as faithfully as I could the thinking of the man who invented depth psychology, contained in his little epistolary attempt to explain a particular psychic phenomenon. And because that attempt is so well written and so suggestive, I began to wonder whether anything similar had ever happened to me. Much as when we read psychiatric textbooks we discover in ourselves by pure empathy the various disorders they describe.

First I asked myself how it was with my sense of guilt in the presence of masterpieces. It's not easy to give an answer; a confession raises the ghosts of subjectivism, makes one think of one's childhood, failures in life, and the people one misses, the dear departed to whom it was not given to share the joy that flows from the experience of beautiful things.

And so yes: standing on the Acropolis I summoned the souls of my fallen friends, I mourned their fate; no longer even their cruel deaths, but the fact that the inexhaustible splendor

of the world had been taken away from them filled me with compassion. I strewed poppy seeds on forgotten graves.

If I did not, however, fall into the skepticism described by Freud, the wavering of faith in the real existence of what I saw, it was for a couple of crucial reasons. If I had been chosen—I thought—and that without any particular merit, chosen in the play of blind fate, then I had to give that choice meaning, deprive it of the accidental and the arbitrary. What does that mean? It means to be equal to the choice and make it my own. To imagine that I was a delegate or an ambassador of all those who didn't make it. And as befits a delegate or ambassador, to forget myself and exert my whole sensibility and understanding so that the Acropolis, the cathedrals, the Mona Lisa would be repeated in me—to the extent, of course, of my limited mind and heart. And to pass on to others what I had grasped of them.

The fact that I always felt uncertain in the face of masterpieces seemed natural to me. It is the good right of masterpieces that they should upset our arrogant certainty and question our importance. They took away a part of my reality, commanded silence, a halt to mouse-like scampering around unimportant and stupid things. They didn't permit me—as Thomas More says—"to concern myself too much with that domineering thing called 'I'." If it is proper to call all this a transaction, it was the most profitable of transactions conceivable. In return for humility and quietude, they gave me the "honey and light" that I could never create myself.

One of the deadly sins of contemporary culture is that it meanspiritedly avoids a frontal confrontation with the highest values. Also the arrogant conviction that we can do without models (both aesthetic and moral), because our place in the world is supposedly so exceptional and can't be compared with anything. That's why we reject the aid of tradition and stumble around in our solitude, digging around in the dark corners of the desolate little soul.

There exists a false view to the effect that tradition is like a fortune, a legacy, which you inherit mechanically, without effort, and that's why those who object to inherited wealth and

unearned privileges are against tradition. But in fact every contact with the past requires an effort, a labor, and a difficult and thankless labor to boot, for our little “I” whines and balks at it.

I always wished I would never lose the belief that great works of the spirit are more objective than we are. And that they will judge us. Someone very rightly said that not only do we read Homer, look at frescoes of Giotto, listen to Mozart, but Homer, Giotto, and Mozart spy and eavesdrop on us and ascertain our vanity and stupidity. Poor utopians, history’s debutants, museum arsonists, liquidators of the past are like those madmen who destroy works of art because they cannot forgive them their serenity, dignity, and cool radiance.

ACROPOLIS

THERE IS NO building in the world that has so enduringly occupied my imagination. Photographs, drawings, descriptions were a watery sustenance, devoid of smell, color, and background. I knew the topography, measurements, and outlines of the main temples quite well, but the whole group was invariably set on a flat plane, had the color of plaster, did not breathe with light, and the sky above it was made of paper.

I couldn't imagine a single bush to stick onto the mountain, which—this I feared most—would turn out to be a wretched little hillock; I couldn't imagine a chink of rock or even a shadow cast by columns. Everything was made of diluted milk and such linear correctness that my eye and the particle of touch in the eye ran over the image without gravity or traction, as if over glass.

When I went there a fear grew in me that the confrontation would destroy what I had constructed over many years of patient guesswork. And would I have the courage to admit it (even if only to myself) if the sacred hill and its surviving remnants of temples did not speak to me, if they turned out to be one of many ruins, not the only or at least an exceptional ruin among the many scattered throughout the world? Would I take part in the age-long conspiracy of delight, based less—as we know well—on a continuously renewed emotion than on the power of suggestion, the repetition of a creed?

The ship reaches the port of Piraeus. The first disappointment: you can't see Athens. The port buildings obscure the city, which lies a few kilometers inland. But shouldn't the first sighting be from the sea? I began to fear that photographers' tricks were carrying the Acropolis out like a ship on a high wave.

A bus goes into the city. I sat down on the right-hand side. A row of houses, depositories, scruffy warehouses and shops covered in white dust. And suddenly, above a narrow little street, completely unexpectedly, high overhead: there it was!

I

> One can still make out[1] a trident mark in the rock of the Acropolis; they say Poseidon made it when competing with Athena for dominion of the land.
>
> PAUSANIAS

AT THE TIME OF the second Median war, the Persians broke through to the Acropolis. The few defenders who had not left the city were murdered, the temples were burned and toppled into heaps of rubble. This time the words of the Delphic oracle were fulfilled. When in 479 B.C. the Athenians returned to their capital after victories at Salamis and Plataia, the Acropolis was—as someone aptly remarked—an empty pedestal.

The great Persian constructions and the pyramids—whatever we might say of their beauty—are to us anonymous works. The Acropolis, or what remained of it, is associated with the name of Pericles.

This figure has flourished in our collective consciousness. His political activity lasted thirty-two years, but even so we call the whole fifth century the age of Pericles.

Many testimonies and contradictory views about him have been preserved. Of the ancient authors, Thucydides and Plutarch are most decidedly “for” Pericles; Aristotle and Plato “against” him. In the *Gorgias*, Plato does not hesitate to call him a bad politician. A full portrait of Pericles has eluded scholars and novelists. One of the best scholars of the Greek political life of those times, G. d’Aspermont Lynden, compares him to the great English Whigs. And indeed, this Mediterranean statesman reminds one somewhat of a British

gentleman, controlled and mild in manner, but executing his plans with iron consistency.

Something of a loner, which is to say, surrounded by a small circle of friends, a circle that included Phidias—not only a sculptor of genius but a Malraux-like figure at the side of Pericles.

Many of his personal traits remained in contradiction to the classical portrait of a leader, and he probably did not evoke instinctive sympathy. He took no part in public entertainments; he never laughed. “Il n’allait jamais[2] dîner en ville”—one of his biographers says, following an ancient author. Coming from a Frenchman, this means a renunciaton of one of the greatest pleasures life has to offer. This wealthy, profoundly well-educated aristocrat became the leader of a democracy out of a deep sense of patriotism and against his own family’s traditions. He did not trust the people (on the contrary, in his youth he felt revulsion for them); he observed the moods of his city carefully and at decisive moments he threw his authority onto the scale with the force of his incomparable eloquence and skills of persuasion. Pericles knew that he could not achieve greatness without Athens (a great politician in a small state is a figure from comedy) and he wished like a jealous lover for Athens to owe her felicity and glory only to him.

His character and private life were above the average; but after all we know that the leader of a popular party should be or at the very least give himself out to be “one of the crowd.” Pericles committed at least two cardinal errors that distanced him from the “man in the street.” He surrounded himself with artists and—worse—philosophers, like Anaxagoras, who took the stars away from the gods and called them shining bodies, or Protagoras of Abdera, an analyst of speech, who taught people how to “make stronger judgments out of weaker ones.” Average Athenians would probably have preferred their leader to be a jocular demagogue than an intellectual and they appear to have felt an instinctive fear before the dialectical trinity: language (rhetoric)—reality—power.

The ferocity with which the people condemned Pericles’s friends when the occasion offered itself indicates that he was

not popular. In 433 B.C. Anaxagoras was driven from Athens, and sixteen years later the same fate met Protagoras, whose treatise on the gods was publicly burned.

Aspasia. We know this woman was Pericles's great and enduring love. For her, he divorced a wealthy woman, a citizen of Athens, with whom he had two sons. Now, to the Athenians divorce itself was a normal thing, recognized both in law and custom. On the other hand, public opinion was scandalized by the fact that Pericles stubbornly pushed for legalization of his relationship. Aspasia came from Miletus. Athenian law only very rarely recognized mixed marriages. And Aspasia was too intelligent to boot, she occupied a position too much on the level of men, and comic poets—the people's voice—portrayed her as a prostitute or the madam of a brothel. Pericles did not respond to these insults, but when Aspasia was accused of impiety, the sixty-five-year-old leader begged the judges at her trial not to condemn her to exile.

And finally, Phidias. We know little about that trial, or series of trials. The basis of the accusation was again that convenient, because vague, charge of impiety. The sculptor was accused of having carved his own image and that of Pericles on a shield of Athena that represented the battle with the Amazons. The prosecutor was one Meno—a foreigner and colleague of Phidias's. One of Pericles's powerful opponents was probably hiding behind this personage. The mob also spread a rumor about gold intended for a monument to Athena which the sculptor had embezzled. Phidias was condemned to banishment.

Plutarch transmits one of the most touching and human portraits of Pericles. He is sitting, sunk in perturbed thought, on a slope of the Acropolis, holding his unlovely large onion-shaped head in his hands. History has passed on the names of many great dreamers, but among them the figure of Pericles is one of the most detailed and concrete.

It was held against him that the gigantic project of rebuilding the Acropolis consumed a considerable part of the treasury of the Athenian League (moved to Athens from Delos in the mid-fifth century), which was meant for purposes of

defense, not for the beautification of the city. Many arguments may be advanced in defense of Pericles.

The construction of the main temple of the Parthenon was begun twenty-two years after the end of the second Persian war and in the fourteenth year of Pericles's reign. Those years were spent rebuilding the city. In contrast with those of the Romans, the Greeks' houses and public architecture were extraordinarily modest. The pride swelling the chests of the Athenians after their victory over an Asiatic power, the role of Athens, Greece's de facto capital—or as it was gently called, "the school of Hellas"—demanded works that measured up to their ambitions.

It was thought for a long time that the cost of building the Parthenon exceeded the sum of two thousand talents. The archaeologist Robert Spencer Stanier, basing his calculations on preserved inscriptions, came to the conclusion that the largest temple on the Acropolis cost 469 talents, more or less the amount paid annually in tribute to Athens by the almost two hundred cities of the League.

The walls, columns, and foundation took up the lion's share of the expenses, 365 talents. The ceiling, roof, and gates cost 65 talents. On the other hand—and this is typical—the sum spent on the friezes[23] and the sculptures of the pediment[24] and metopes[10], the works we now value highly and place in the realm of artistic creation, was the relatively low sum of 39 talents.[*]

It should be added here that this whole calculation only relates to the buildings. We know that there was a statue of Athena in the temple—by the hand of Phidias. The invaluable Pausanias—patient maker of inventories of so many lost historical monuments of antiquity—has passed on the following description to us: "The statue represents Athena standing[3], wearing a tunic that falls to her feet; on her chest, an ivory sculpture of a Medusa's head. Athena holds in one palm the goddess of victory, four elbows high, and in the other a thunderbolt. There is a shield at her feet, and on the spot where the thunderbolt touches the earth—a snake. This snake without any doubt portrays Erichtonios. The pedestal is

covered with a frieze showing the birth of Pandora, the first woman to appear on the earth, as Hesiod and other poets tell us."

The statue perished, and all hypothetical reconstructions, if only the best known, by Austrian scholar Kamil Praschniker, casts us into a kind of aesthetic embarrassment; a colossus twelve meters tall, held up by an internal construction of wood, the body done in ivory, the garment of gold plate, the eyes of enamel, pupils of black stone. Fortunately the statue was veiled by the shadows of a dark *naos*[4]. And in addition the cost of this monstrous jewel is assumed to have been four times that of the surrounding edifice.

Athens was experiencing a period of unprecedented economic growth. The intensively exploited mines in Laurion yielded not only a valuable ore—silver, but also allowed for the minting of the strongest and universally sought-after coin which soon became international. In the time of the Pisistratides the capital of infertile, barren Attica counted about twenty thousand inhabitants, whereas by the time of Pericles the number had risen to two hundred and fifty thousand (including metics[5] and slaves), which resulted in a population density unusual for that age (over 100 inhabitants for each square kilometer). Undertaking great public construction works was not merely a way of repaying the gods for their help in the battle with the Persians, but also an economic necessity.

It is easiest to imagine that the Acropolis was the work of a great state enterprise that hired thousands of slaves, and that projects were naturally carried out by Athenian architects of genius: Iktinos, Callicrates, Mnesicles, while the free citizens supervised the work and were responsible for the sculptural décor of the temples. However, the truth is that the Acropolis was a "collective work"—a thing we seem unable to grasp these days—by hundreds of small artisan workshops. Each part of a construction was put together in workshops at the foot of the sacred hill and then wended its way up to the Acropolis on the back of a mule. An infinitely important and

useful detail: the quarries where the marble was extracted were situated almost a day's journey from Athens.

Participation in the construction was proportional to the wealth of the citizens. An Athenian who owned one slave was obliged to bring in ten cartloads of marble; one who employed two free artisans and three slaves entered into a contract for the erection of one column. Work on one column took 50 to 110 days.

The circle of employees was naturally not confined to masons and sculptors; it also included carpenters, ropemakers, goldsmiths, and painters.

What did they earn? We know the accounts from the time of the Erechtheion's construction (work was begun in 409–408 B.C.). The laborers, artisans, architects were paid a drachma, which was the lowest wage on which a family could be supported (at that time, 55 liters of grain cost 2 drachmas in Athens; an ox cost 50–100 drachmas). The astonishing thing is that positions were not differentiated. An ordinary mason was paid a daily wage, an architect got his pay every few weeks. One is also struck by the small difference between the earnings of the heavy laborers and highly skilled workers on the one hand and on the other, the "diets" of the various civil servants, judges, and scribes of the magistrature. Renowned artisans did not receive a financial recompense commensurate with their skills; there was no premium for talent.*

Parts that would be hidden from the eye were built with the same care as external parts. The columns gave the impression that they had been forged out of a single block. This effect was achieved by means of very precise cuts in particular drums of stone, which fit together almost perfectly. Imperfections in the seams were removed by rubbing the adjoining surfaces with sand and water. In the center of the columns there were square openings. Olivewood pegs were driven into them. Neither mortar nor metal elements were used.

The preserved testimonies all concur that the work, which was supervised by Phidias, was carried out in an atmosphere of joy and enthusiasm. It is the only way to explain the perfection of the construction and the speed with which the

temples grew. The Parthenon, begun in 477 B.C., was basically finished in the course of nine years, though work on the friezes continued another six years. The Propylaea, whose final completion was interrupted by the Peloponnesian war, was raised in the record time of five years.

According to legend the goddess Athena watched over the labors herself. When one of the best artisans falls from the scaffolding and is mortally injured, Athena appears to Pericles in a dream and recommends a magical remedy which saves the life of the man doing the work. This story seems to have been taken straight from the chronicles of the builders of Gothic cathedrals.

The mountain on which the Acropolis temples stand is beautiful; it plunges down precipitously on three sides in almost perpendicular slopes of a grayish-blue hue. Only on the side facing the sea is the slope gentler, but a pilgrimage to the sacred mount always had the character of an arduous climb. The rock of the Acropolis is 50 meters in height, the flat top of the mountain has a more or less triangular shape with a base of 150 meters and sides of 300 meters. In these figures alone, one finds a natural module and a principle of proportion, as if the earth itself had set the tempo for the rhythms of architecture.

Today you enter onto the Acropolis by a gate called the Beulé Gate. A pathetic inscription in Greek informs you that it was France that discovered the gate, as well as the walls, towers, and steps. Dated: 1856.

What a French archaeologist called the main entrance and took to derive from the classical age was nothing but a space between two pylons raised in the age of a later empire, without a trace of Greek construction. They were probably erected at the time when the Acropolis had to defend itself against barbarians from the North.

It would seem that there is no object archaeology has studied more thoroughly than the Acropolis. This is the suggestion given by guide books, who give the layout of the main buildings *grosso modo*[6] in the time of Pericles. But one should not forget that the sacred hill had been populated from Neolithic times. There are remains here of a palace from the

Mycenean age and remnants of Cyclopian walls similar to those found at Argos and Mycenae. Wooden temples were probably built here and later stone temples, raised by tyrants. Here the first legendary Athenian kings were buried. It served as a refuge from enemy invasions. The Acropolis had this dual character of a fortress and a place of worship throughout the millennia of its stormy history.

The ancient road traveled by processions to the sacred hill was replaced by paths winding their way between trees, for the convenience of tourists. The closer you get to the buildings on the top of the hill the more they vanish from view. First the Erechtheion goes, blocked from view by the massive wall of the Pinakoteka, and then the Parthenon disappears. The mighty stems of columns, the piling up of bastions; the offensive of perpendicular stone masses holds one's gaze. What were the Propylaea of which the Athenians were so proud? They had no defensive purpose, that much is certain. They expressed the deluded hope of the people of the Periclean age that the Acropolis would never again be a fortress, a final refuge. Whoever stepped from the sharp light into the shade of the colonnade's roof—now no longer in existence—must have felt admiration and respect for the power of the city that had raised that structure.

If one may speculate on the subject of the Propylaea's aesthetic function, it seems they were a stone curtain, a holding back of sight. Beyond them, one would meet the Parthenon face to face. The passage was like a drawing in of breath before an exclamation of delight. After passing through the Propylaea, the Parthenon appears more unexpectedly, larger, and more massive than if it had grown slowly before the eye with each step of the journey.

One should not forget, however, that—leaving aside the condition the site is in—we now see the Acropolis completely differently than did the ancients. After passing through the Propylaea, an Athenian of the fifth-century B.C. would have barely seen the upper part of the Parthenon, whose western façade was screened off by the encircling wall of the no longer existent sanctuary of Artemis. His sight was probably drawn first of all to the nine-meter-high statue of Athena Promachos,

a work of Phidias now lost. To the left of the statue of Athena was a bronze chariot, on the right, trophies captured from the Persians during the second Median war: prows of ships, armor, helmets, and shields.

Ancient tourists were less sensitive to the purely aesthetic qualities of architecture—the rows of columns, the balance of building blocks—but they were crazy about these curiosities (like the model of the Trojan horse), monuments, *ex vota*, trophies, tombstones, reliquies, trees, and stones of mythical origin. We know this if only from the meticulous descriptions of these (to us trivial) details compiled by ancient authors and travelers, men like Polemon of the second century B.C. who devotes a full four books of his works to them. Ancient temples, the Acropolis along with others, were not only places of worship but genuine museums of curiosities and national relics.

The Propylaea, that lavish, proud, I want to say palatial, stage set, cost four times more than the main temple on the Acropolis. Mnesicles managed to finish it before the Peloponnesian war, but both wings show signs of a sudden halt in construction.

North of the Propylaea stands the Pinakoteka, a now empty museum of Greek painting, whose loss dooms us to speculation and fantasy. Was Apelles's grapevine really so naturalistic that it drew living birds? And how should we imagine the art of Pamphilos, who painted lightning and thunder and as Pliny writes, "that which cannot be painted[7]"?

On the southern wing, on the bastion that sticks farthest out, is the small Ionian temple of Athena Nike, disturbingly light and fragile above the precipice from which the unfortunate Aegeus threw himself.

For a long time it was thought that the Parthenon appeared in sight when one passed the last columns of the Propylaea. But one was supposed to approach its Western façade, where there was a triangular courtyard with small Propylaea, through which one took in the whole mass of the construction. Greek architects not only erected the temples but, using the terrain's declivities, terraces, and walls, organized "points of view"

with the same consistency and finesse as they did the other architectonic details.

The Parthenon is certainly one of the most beautiful Doric temples. It seems much larger and more massive than its actual measurements suggest: length, 69 meters; width, 31 meters; height, 17 meters. This impression of enormity is also due—if we do not wish to content ourselves with the aesthete's remark, "Greek temples have no measurements, only proportions"—to the fact that it is as if the building is torn loose from the earth. It stands on a great stylobate[8] with three levels of differing height. The highest is the level on which the columns rest.

It is a wounded building, stripped of its sculptures, which were part of the essential, integral architecture. The Greeks' eyes would have run invariably toward the highest parts of the temple, now empty, where Phidias carved in stone the quarrel between Poseidon and Athena (the western pediment) and the birth of Athena (the eastern pediment). The sculptures were polychromatic, covered with gold, painted sky blue, red, and brown—and not at all "discreetly," as the bloodless aesthetes would have it. Those brightly colored images of the heavens of Antiquity were not made for us, but for the merchant from Delos, the peasant from Boeotia, for the delegates of remote and impoverished cities of the League, and they were meant to dazzle them. Athena, identified with the city, was the dazzling force she was in the Homeric hymns. Great Olympus trembled under the weight of the mighty goddess with blue-green eyes: "All around the earth let out[9] a shattering scream, a storm gathered at sea, raising dark billows, then the harsh waves suddenly subsided."

The themes on the metopes were the battles of giants, *gigantomachia*, the conquest of Troy, the war with the Amazons, and finally the fight of the Centaurs with the Lapites. The selection of these legendary episodes was far from arbitrary and possessed its own clear ideological meaning. It was like a mythological prologue to the Persian wars, crowned with the victory of Europe over Asia. The Old

Testament of Greek legend here extends its hand to a history contemporary with the artists.

The partially preserved so-called interior frieze represents a pan-Athenian procession.* It is a group portrait of the free citizens of a free city, going to pay homage to their heavenly protectress. Those who in reality stood on the steps of the temple were brought into proximity with the gods not on their knees but in a fine parade, without false modesty and without defiant heaven-storming pride. It is an unsettling fact (unsettling for those who see Greek temples as shrines of rationalism) that this frieze was almost invisible, permanently in the shadow cast by the ceiling of the peristyle[17].

Today none of this exists. We have learned to look at works of Greek art as fragments and scraps. We believed too easily that they owe their perfection and beauty to being fragments and scraps. We cannot, nor do we even want to imagine the Venus of Milo or any Greek temple as they really were.

We derive a strange aesthetic satisfaction (which has probably never been fully analyzed) from the fact that the capital of a column holds up nothing, that the marble cheek of a goddess suddenly loses its fleshly smoothness and turns into raw uneven stone. This constant neighboring of art and nature, the clear border between what was carved by the artist's chisel and nature's chisel, does not prompt the imagination to fill out the whole but on the contrary, silences it.

The aesthetes of the nineteenth century (and these days this attitude to ancient works of art is almost universal) were glad in a certain way that Greek architecture had come to us stripped of color and sculpture. Time had reduced them to skeletons, to rudimentary shapes. We are filled with a joy, more intellectual than sensual, flowing from the analysis of forms. We revel in the Greeks' "optical corrections" that make their most splendid constructions look as though they had come from under the chisel of a single sculptor. The columns standing on corners are in fact slightly thicker, because they were more directly struck by light, which thins shapes, and they were also set closer to the neighboring columns, in order not to seem isolated. The line of the stylobate and the

architrave[11] are not horizontal but lightly curved. For the great builders of the Parthenon, Iktinos and Callicrates, these “optical corrections” were not merely a matter of aesthetics but a real technical postulate: they ensured the building’s compactness and equilibrium.

North of the Parthenon near the wall of Themistocles is the Erechtheion, which was not finished until 407 B.C. In classical times, despite the obvious chronology, it was called the old temple. Herodotus relates that during the Median war, when the Persians were forcing their way onto the Acropolis, its last defenders looked for refuge here, it was here they implored the gods for a miraculous intervention. This episode indicates that it was the holiest site on the sacred mount, perhaps the seat of an oracle in preclassical times, and also the palace of Mycenean kings.

Despite the archaeological digs and studies that have been carried out for dozens of years the Erechtheion has remained one of the most difficult Greek sanctuaries to identify. Various cults are mingled and piled on top of each other. “The true chaos of a holy place” as someone aptly remarked.

The Erechtheion does not give the impression the Parthenon does of a uniform construction, and in fact it is two connected temples: the eastern part dedicated to Athena, the western part to Poseidon, whom tradition identified with Erechtheus, one of the first mythical rulers of Attica. And so the intention of the architects was for this to be a temple of reconciliation, as we know these two gods of Olympus engaged in a dispute over the land of Athens.

The northern part of the Erechtheion is the most mysterious, both in terms of its layout and its significance. We know that the altar was usually situated in front of the Greek sanctuary; here, however, we find all of three altars inside. It was also a sanctuary mausoleum or rather a sanctuary tomb, where the remains of the first Attic kings were placed, surrounded with honor, under the portico of caryatids. The stone benches running alongside the walls suggest that initiations took place here. So the Ionian temple envelops the oldest reliquary of Athenian myths and cults.

What is the Acropolis as a whole? The answer from the school textbooks would be: a harmonious architectural ensemble. But an unprejudiced eye discovers this is not the case. The monumental Doric Parthenon stands next to the Ionian Erechtheion, the massive Propylaea next to the exquisite, delicate temple of Athena Nike, chiseled like a fine sculpture.

The archaeologist Arnold Walter Lawrence[12] compared the Acropolis to the palace at Persepolis and concluded that Pericles wanted to compete with the magnificent construction of the defeated Persian monarchs. The evidence for this is supposed to be the principle of dysymmetry, alien to Greek art, the focus of the main accents on one building, not centrally situated, the splendid palatial entrance, and also a certain excessive lavishness of exterior decoration.

A simpler and more likely answer to the question why the Acropolis is not an ensemble of homogenous design is given by the chronology of the particular buildings. We do not know what plans Pericles had, because they were never fully realized. The outbreak of war and the death of the leader interrupted the work. The Parthenon and Propylaea are his accomplishment.

One spirit gave rise to both buildings. Monumental, clearly laid out, conveying the triumph of democracy, full of pride and faith in the future.

When Pericles pronounces his funeral oration (which we have from Thucydides) in honor of the Athenians who perished in the first year of the Peloponnesian war, we might expect a long litany of gods to whose protection he commends the citizens' fate. But no, it is in praise of the city. The name of Athens is sounded in a tone not just lofty but almost religious or mystical.

The Peloponnesian war brought an end to mighty Athens. Its shadow can be traced on the buildings of the Acropolis. The Parthenon is twenty years older than the Erechtheion (barely a generation's difference), but the temples seem to belong to different epochs. The first, massive, is dedicated to one divinity, or to a worshipped city. The second, with its

capricious layout (halls on two levels, three entrances decorated with the large, nonfunctional caryatids), gathers under its roof many heroes and gods. One may see in this a flight into the past characteristic of epochs of decline, a return to old times, a desperate search for tradition. The columns of the Parthenon are like the stony chorus of Antigone.* The Erechtheion, like the drama of Euripides, is a promise of the Hellenistic world, a world of imperial quarrels and unrest.

II

> Athens, filled with the ruins of ancient palaces, is a great impoverished hospital where there are as many beggars as there are Christians.
>
> BABIN

IN THE COURSE OF nearly two thousand and five hundred years, the Acropolis was assaulted by tidal waves of war, siege, pillage, and profanation. It seems an extraordinary thing that Pericles's creation was even partially reconstructed. A few Gothic inscriptions, Turkish tombstones, Venetian lions—these are the only material testimony to the stormy history of the sacred mount.

Alexander the Great knew that Athens was and would long remain a center of anti-Macedonian irredentism. But the prestige of the former Greek capital was so great that after the battle on the Granicus, which opened the gates to Asia for him, he sent twenty captured shields, which were hung on the columns of the Parthenon.

The son of one of his generals, a certain Demetrios, called Conqueror of Cities, permitted himself a profanation unprecedented and unrivaled in the history of the Acropolis. He simply moved into the Parthenon, that is, he turned a part of the temple into his private residence, explaining to the Athenians that the goddess herself had invited him into her house. His conduct throughout was quite uninhibited. He held

ostentatious feasts in the company of noisy courtesans, and when the scandal exceeded all bounds, there were theatrical reconciliations with the goddess. Plutarch speaks of this with a fine restraint: "With an eye to the city's glory there is no need to give an explicit or detailed account of all the horrors and indignities committed here.[13]" The Demetrios episode seems straight from the *Lives of the Emperors* of Suetonius.

The sack of Corinth by the Romans in 146 B.C. (a suggestive description by Polybius: "Paintings thrown into the dust[14] and soldiers stretched out on them playing dice") should be a terrible *memento* for Athens. But in that city, where every rhetor was a disconsolate lover of lost freedom, people only waited for the right occasion for revenge.

Rome's internal difficulties led the Pontic king Mithrydates to look for enemies of Rome in the East and in Greece. At the head of the anti-Roman movement in Athens stands the rhetor Aristion, whom the mob call a strategist. The Roman Senate sends out Sulla against Mithrydates. His military forces were weak but the cruelty with which he went about bringing the Greeks to their knees was unequaled. The treasuries of Olympia, Epidauros, and Delphi were plundered, sacred groves uprooted. "We are the soldiers of the gods, because the gods pay us."

The siege of Athens lasted ten long months. The Acropolis defended itself most stubbornly. When Aristion, putting too much faith in eloquence, sent two rhetors to convince the Roman commander of the necessity of lifting the siege, Sulla's answer was curt: "The Senate and the Roman people sent me here not to take lessons in fine language but to punish the rebels." In May 86 B.C., the Acropolis falls. A massacre of its defenders and the suicide of the best citizens follow, and ships loaded with works of art and manuscripts set sail for the new capital of the world.

It is difficult to make even an approximate tally of the sacrifices and losses Greece suffered in order to become a school for Rome. For to the pillage of war, which was in some sense "official" one must add the great number of works taken away by private collectors.

An archaeological sensation came a few years before World War I with the discovery on the seabed off the coast of Tunisia, near the town of Mahdia, of a ship filled with works of art, furniture, and even finished architectural objects like four meter long columns, blocks of marble, capitals. These objects were of high artistic quality and scholars established without any difficulty on the basis of the inscriptions on tombstones that they came from Athens. The shipwreck must have occurred at the beginning of the 1st century B.C. There is no doubt that this was one of the ships carrying Sulla's loot from Piraeus to Rome. Chased by a storm, overloaded with cargo, it went down near the Tunisian coast. In any case, we know that Sulla brought columns from Athens which were used to rebuild the Roman Capitol, which had been burnt during the civil war.

The famous Verres trial of 70 B.C., immortalized in Cicero's speech for the prosecution, offers us valuable analogies and gives us a sense of what the Roman "hunger for art" really was. In the three years during which he held high office in Sicily, Verres stole everything, from the statues of gods in temples to the rings he spotted on the fingers of wealthy Sicilians. The wolfish appetite of the new rulers of the world did not always go hand in hand with connoisseurship and we often encounter astonishing ignorance on the part of the Romans. The consul Mummius, who conquered and plundered Corinth, threatens those responsible with the transportation to Rome of objects of Greek art that if they damage them, he will force them—as if it were possible—to recreate the masterpieces.

Cicero himself, a passionate collector, as we know from his letters to Attica when the latter was in Greece ("If you find any sculptures[15] I'd like, don't hesitate to purchase them for me"), committed an array of errors in his speech against Verres (false attributions, a failure to differentiate real artistic value, and so on).

From the time of Augustus the Roman emperors employed a rather liberal policy toward Athens. In the *Satyricon* Petronius jokes that in Athens it was easier to meet a god than a man. And indeed, under Roman rule the former capital of

Greece underwent a true invasion of statuary—not only gods and emperors but also minor protectors and benefactors of the city. Augustus himself had many statues in Athens, of which at least one stood on the Acropolis. Near the Parthenon, twenty meters from its eastern façade, a temple was raised, dedicated to Rome and the emperor. Some fragments remain from which one can surmise that this small, round, heavy building, placed right next to a masterpiece from the time of Pericles, was—to put it mildly—an aesthetic misunderstanding. In the area of the western wall of the Pinakoteka there is to this day a huge pedestal of gray marble which served as an elevation for successive statues in honor of one of the kings of Pergamon, then Anthony[*] and Cleopatra, finally Agrippa, the emperor's brother-in-law, who as we know secured privileges for the city.

Not only pedestals exchanged owners; frequently a new emperor's head was simply plonked down on an existing torso and given a new inscription, so that the same sculpture represented first Tiberius, then Nero, Vespasian, or Titus.

Saint Paul the Apostle gave the Athenians too much credit when he called them the most religious of people, having seen a temple in Athens dedicated to an unknown god[16]. This was the usual cautionary procedure, just as the monuments of emperors were not evidence of enthusiasm but of opportunism.

Emperors Claudius and Caligula are credited with the construction of the great steps in the style of the Capitol that lead to the Propylaea. One of the most authentic friends of Hellas, the emperor Hadrian, carried out his plans for the beautification of Athens off the grounds of the sacred hill. But as Pausanias notes, his monument stood inside the Parthenon. We don't know if this was because Hadrian considered himself a new Theseus or because no appropriate spot could be found among the many statues crowded together on the sacred hill.

Julian the Apostate was the last emperor who wished to return Olympus to the gods of Hellas and to Greece its ancient glory. In a letter to the Senate and the people of Athens he writes: "What floods of tears I wept, what groans I uttered, stretching out my arms to the Acropolis and beseeching Minerva to shield her servant and not abandon him."

A legend relates that he sent ambassadors to Delphi—plundered by Herulians—to obtain counsel from the oracle and ask for a blessing on his plans. He got the following answer: “Say to the king: the once joyous edifice of the temple now lies in ruins; the god is without shelter; the springs and laurel groves are silent; even water has ceased to speak.”

The name of Deksippos is sunk in the sands of oblivion. There was no Plutarch then to write his life, nor any fine sculptor to pass on his likeness. But this Athenian orator and author surely deserves to be remembered by Hellenophiles. When in the middle of the third century the Goths conquered Attica and managed to settle within the walls of Athens, Deksippos organized an improvised citizens’ army in the gorges of Pentelikon and Parnassus which drove the Goths out. The last, if but brief, victory of the Greeks. In the Louvre there is an inscription in honor of Deksippos. From it we learn that he was an archon and a member of the honorary committee of the Great pan-Athenaia, which is testimony to the vitality (at least nominal) of traditional Athenian institutions.

Toward the end of the fourth century, Athens comes under Byzantine rule. In Constantinople a university is founded in 425, controlled and endowed by the state. The free schools of the Athenian philosophers now have serious competition. For centuries, Athens withstood the competition of other centers of ancient civilization, but the doctrine of Neoplatonism which had developed so vigorously in the fourth and fifth centuries was judged hostile to the state religion—Christianity—and this was one of the main reasons philosophers and rhetors were driven out of Athens by a decree of Justinian in 529. This administrative act was harsher than any lost battle. Athens was reduced to the role of a small garrison town of the Eastern empire.

At the turn of the sixth and seventh centuries the Parthenon was converted to a church of Divine Wisdom. This actually meant adopting the Greek temple in an unaltered state. A wall was built between the columns of the peristyle. An entrance to the temple was made on the west side, and the old entrance was walled up, making an apse[18] covered with frescoes; a

bishop's throne was "borrowed" from the theater of Dionysus. All this work did not, however, alter the Parthenon's structure. Its exterior appearance was not violated. In similar fashion, the Erechtheion was converted into a Church of the Mother of God.

The rulers of Byzantium rarely visited the former capital of Hellas. The visit of Basil II at the beginning of the eleventh century impressed itself most deeply on the popular consciousness. He chose the Acropolis to celebrate his victory over the Bulgarians. It was a bow to a long-extinct tradition. We may gain a sense of the spiritual state of the Athenians at the end of the twelfth century from the homilies of Michael Akominatos, who was archbishop of Athens for thirty years. He resided on the Acropolis, he celebrated mass in the Parthenon; one might think he attained the ultimate dream of every humanist. In his flowery sermons this erudite Christian and lover of Antiquity mixed mythology with Scripture and exalted his flock, telling them they were the golden seed and that their faith would make them morally superior to Ajax, Diogenes, Pericles, and Themistocles.

The poor illiterate flock (also a rather complex ethnic mixture, speaking a language remote from classical Greek) listened and understood nothing. Archbishop Michael could not suppress a cry of disappointment: "O Athens—mother of wisdom[19], how low you have fallen into ignorance! When I deliver my sermons, so simple, so devoid of artifice, it seems to me that I am saying incomprehensible things in the foreign tongue of some Persian or Scythian."

Waves of crusades weakened the Byzantine Empire, already exhausted by constant battles with the Turks and Bulgarians. Greece is irrevocably taken from the Byzantines and split up into a number of kingdoms. Athens fell to Otto de la Roche, who adopts the title of Megas Kyr and wins the title of prince from the king of France. And so arose the Frankish dynasty that ruled Attica for three generations, until the heirless death in 1308 of the last of the Attic de la Roches. In that time the Acropolis is made over into a medieval fortress. It was surrounded with a turreted wall, and on the southern wing of the Propylaea a massive square watchtower was built,

which lasted right up to the last quarter of the nineteenth century.

Near the city, where Philip the Macedonian routed the Greeks and Sulla won a victory over the expeditionary force of Mithrydates, the Franks suffered a defeat at the hands of the Catalans. They were mercenaries whom the Byzantine emperor Andronicus Paleologus had recruited to do battle with the Turks. Soon however they started making conquests on their own initiative. Athens and Thebes fell into the hands of the Catalans, but their rule was brief and did not leave any mark on the architecture of the sacred hill.

Florentines from the wealthy merchant family of Acciauoli —the next rulers of the duchy of Athens—brought on the Acropolis one of the most bizarre episodes in its architectural history. One of the Acciauoli, Nerio, had the ambition to make Athens equal the princely courts of the Italian *trecento*. The main buildings of the Acropolis, the Parthenon, and the Erechtheion, were temples. That left the Propylaea, which were turned into an Italian-style palace. The monumental entrance from the age of Pericles was walled in and windows were opened in the walls, forming in this way four large reception halls. This curious Italian-Dorian Palazzo d'Acropoli was connected to the Pinakoteka. New stories were added onto its flat roof.

In 1456, shortly after the fall of Constantinople, Omar, the deputy of Muhammed II, incorporates Athens into his holdings. For the Turks it was a strategic point and nothing else.*

The new techniques of war and the decisive role of the artillery, which celebrated its triumph at the time of the conquest of Byzantium, demanded fundamental changes in the defensive architecture of the sacred mount. The medieval fortifications of the Athenian princes were inadequate. The Propylaea disappeared behind defensive walls, and inside the fortress military buildings and storehouses for ammunition arose. The Parthenon was converted into a mosque. The only architectural addition visible from the outside was a minaret

planted on the roof of the classical edifice. The harem of the castle's warden (aga) was accommodated in the Erechtheion.

Storehouses of gunpowder were kept inside the Propylaea, in a specially built hall with a cupola. Popular tradition, repeated by a certain French traveler, says that in 1656 the aga of the Acropolis decided to bomb the church of Saint Demetrios during one of the Islamic holidays. In the night before this base plan was to be carried out, a thunderstorm broke out and a lightning flash that hit the Propylaea caused an explosion which brought down the roof and architrave. The stores of gunpowder were then transferred to the Parthenon, whose solid construction, it was thought, was a guarantee of safety.

In the course of two centuries of Turkish rule, no foreign intervention had to be fought off, with the exception of the short and insignificant expedition of Venetians several years before the Acropolis was turned into a Turkish fortress. The ambitions of the maritime republic revived after the rout of the select Ottoman forces at Vienna in 1683. That distant battle decided the fate of the most famous building on the Acropolis.

In the spring of 1684 there is a severing of relations between Venice and Turkey. A year later, in the summer, the Venetian army under the command of Francesco Morosini lands on the Peloponnesus, winning a number of victories and finally acquiring domination of the entire peninsula. Morosini's military forces were led by officers of various nationalities: Swedes, Germans, but also Frenchmen. Count Otto Wilhelm Koenigsmarck, the son of a famous commander in the Thirty-Year War, distinguishes himself in these military operations. His wife is accompanied on the expedition by the *dame de compagnie* Anna Akerhjelm, whose diaries and letters are a valuable source for learning about the stages of this unfortunate expedition.

Control of the Peloponnese peninsula did not satisfy the Venetians, particularly as the Turks were using a defensive strategy. A consequence of the war is a broadening of the conquests, and Morosini's military staff considers two projects: the first involves an attack on the island of Euboea,

the second the conquest of Athens. In the end the second plan is adopted. The Turks prepare for a siege of Athens and strengthen their defensive positions. The temple of Athena Nike falls victim to these operations, razed by Turkish engineers to make place for a bastion on which a battery of arms is placed. Material from the temple is used to strengthen the fortifications.

The Venetians carry out a cunning war maneuver which is meant to suggest to the Turks that the target of their attack is the island of Euboea. In fact they land at Piraeus and Morosini's army, meeting no serious resistance, draws near to Athens, the main point of defense. The Venetian artillery and land forces close a circle around the fortress. Both sides of the battle prepare themselves for a long and exhausting siege.

The mortar fire on the Acropolis has the character, if one may invoke terms of modern warfare, of a war of attrition, a steady barrage. However, on September 26, 1687, a shot fired from the fortifications near the monument of Lysicrates goes through the roof of the Parthenon and causes a powerful explosion. Twenty something columns are blown to bits, as well as a huge part of the architrave, the vault, the roof, and the walls of the *naos*. The Turkish pasha, chief of the garrison and of many soldiers, perishes under the rubble. Three days later a flag with the lion of Saint Mark flutters over the pitiful ruins.

The victory of the Venetians was clouded by a sense of guilt. Count Koenigsmarck was by no means a soulless general. In his youth he had received a solid education and at the university of Leipzig he had given a Latin discourse on the sorry fate of Athens, surrendered to the hands of barbarians. History forced him to be the one who dealt his adored city the most painful blow. Anna Akerhjelm writes "how sincerely and deeply the Count regrets having razed the beautiful temple of Minerva that stood for three thousand years" (a minor chronological inaccuracy) and expresses the conviction that it will never be rebuilt. There is much hypocrisy in this. There are well-founded suppositions that Greek spies informed Koenigsmarck of what was in the Parthenon, and that the fatal shot was not an accident.

From the heaps of rubble which now constitute the Acropolis, Morosini wants to bring to Venice the central fragment of the Parthenon pediment, representing the quarrel of Athena and Poseidon. In a report to the Senate he writes: "Foreseeing the abandonment of Athens[20], I took the thought of collecting a few of the prettiest decorations that might add to the glory of the Republic. To this aim I made efforts to dismantle a statue of Jupiter and bas-reliefs of two magnificent horses from the façade of the temple of Minerva, where the most beautiful sculptures are. But as soon as the removal of these sculptures was initiated, everything collapsed from the great height and it is a miracle that the workers did not meet with a great misfortune."[*]

The conquest of Athens by Morosini was also nonsensical from a strategic point of view. The Venetians withdraw from the city, taking with them a part of the local Christian population. The Turks return to deserted Athens and fortify the Acropolis once again. In the middle of the devastated Parthenon, as if in a cage with its bars torn out, they build a small mosque without a minaret.

The metamorphoses of Athens or the Acropolis alone across the centuries are difficult to study because of the almost complete lack of iconographic material. Medieval and Renaissance sketches give a quite fantastic picture of Athens, portraying it as a Flemish seaside town with Gothic churches or as a gloomy northern castle. On maritime maps Athens is called Setina, and the Acropolis seen from the sea was nothing but a point of orientation.

Travel to Greece and description of the monuments preserved did not become possible until the seventeenth century, when first France and then England opened diplomatic relations with the High Porte[26]. Missions are established in Athens which we might now call consulates, with a political and commercial character. At that time the people who constituted a sort of French "colony" could be counted on the fingers of both hands: a few missionaries, a stray gunsmith, and a couple of persons of indeterminate profession. It was in effect impossible to visit the Acropolis, or

at least extremely difficult, as the Turks did not let foreigners into the fortress for fear of spies.

For that reason, the accounts of stubborn travelers who managed to put together descriptions and maps of Athens and the Acropolis in circumstances of personal danger rouse admiration. Let us imagine these enthusiasts: they journeyed for long days on a donkey's back, sleeping in abandoned shepherd huts in the mountains, until at last they came to the city of their dreams. Here began complicated negotiations with the commander of the fortress, buttressed by sacks of coffee and fat domestic fowl. Finally, permission to visit, laced with an array of warnings and limitations. Then they bustle hurriedly among the Turkish tents, military buildings and temples, under the vigilant eye of distrustful soldiers, with their measuring instruments, sketchbooks, and indispensable Pausanias, the only Baedeker for over ten centuries. Everything depended on the moods of the fortress commander and his soldiers.

Two members of the Dilettante's Club in London, which sponsored many archaeological expeditions in the East, the gentlemen Stuart and Revett, carried out measurements of the ancient Athenian monuments without obstruction, but the Englishman Vernhum[21] and the Frenchman Robert de Dreux got rocks thrown at them and the threat of gunfire when they were measuring the theater of Herodes Atticus.

The draughtsman Edward Dodwell gives an amusing description of his adventures. He worked on the Acropolis using a camera obscura—the prototype of a photographic camera which produced a diminished image of a building and thus allowed him to preserve the precise proportions of the recreated monuments in his sketches. "One day when I was drawing the Parthenon with the aid of my camera obscura, the commander of a garrison asked me with disquiet what kind of magic tricks my strange machine could do[22]." Dodwell tries to explain and demonstrate the workings of his gadget. The Turkish officer is plainly terrified. "Observing this […] I changed my tone and threatened him that if he obstructed and

molested me, I would shut him up in my black box." From that day onward Dodwell worked without being disturbed.

Among the travelers who passed on valuable accounts of the Acropolis from the time before Morosini's bombs hit it, it is worthy mentioning the Jesuit Babin and the Lyon doctor and lover of Antiquity, Jacob Spon. Babin describes the Parthenon with particular precision, which is of extraordinary value to us, also because Pausanias (as we know a lover of curiosities) in his work passes over the most beautiful temple on the Acropolis in silence. For the French Jesuit it is the embodiment of perfection, aesthetically superior to the Hagia Sophia in Constantinople, and the sculptures of the frieze and pediment cannot be compared with any work of art contemporary with the author. For a time dominated by the Baroque style, Babin's view is exceptional and almost provocative in relation to the tastes of his age.

Jacob Spon's three-volume report[25] on his Greek peregrinations was published in Lyon in 1678. Connoisseurs maintain that it was "the first modern journey to Athens worthy of the name." It is easy for us now to enumerate the mistakes and inaccuracies of this educated traveler, such as his confusion of the two pediments of the Parthenon and worse, ascription of them to sculptors of the age of Hadrian. Greece was a country untouched by architects. Spon's book quickly became very popular in Europe and it was not absent from Koenigsmark's trunk, as Anna Akerhjelm remembers.

In the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris a folder of sketches is preserved. A conservationist from the Napoleonic era gave it quite an odd title: "The Temple of Minerva in Athens, built by Hadrian, sketched on the orders of Monsieur Nointel, ambassador to the High Porte, before the temple was razed by the Venetians." The Marquis de Nointel was without a doubt one of Louis XIV's most able and resourceful diplomats. After dealing with complicated relations in the Turkish capital, he sets off on a journey to Greece accompanied by a large retinue. He arrives in Athens in the summer of 1674.

"I entered the treasure house (the Acropolis) where these wonders are kept for the first time amid festive cannon fire and

returned four times *incognito* in order to be able to better admire and familiarize myself with the beautiful sculptures, which my painter recreated very well."

The drawings of the Parthenon—by the hand of Jacques Carrey—are no masterpieces, and all the better for that, for an artist with imagination would not have been so precise. They were doubtless made in a rush, in an awkward position, without any scaffolding to facilitate things, but their value as documents is inestimable.

Nointel was certainly a sincere admirer of Ancient works and his concern for their fate, as well as his less disinterested motives, comes through in the ambassador's reports. "The originals absolutely deserve to be placed in the state rooms or galleries of His Royal Highness, where they would enjoy the care with which His Majesty surrounds art and learning […]; then they would be beyond the reach of the desecrations and insults of the Turks, who consider it praiseworthy to hack off the noses or other parts of sculptures to avoid idolatry."

The sketches in the folder executed during Nointel's journey show that many of the statues on the pediment of the Parthenon were indeed damaged, but the main body of sculpture—if one may call it that—was preserved intact.

A century later Count Choiseul-Gouffier was appointed the French ambassador to Constantinople. As a twenty-four-year-old youth he made a journey to Greece, which he describes in his notable book *Voyage pittoresque dans l'Empire ottoman*[27]*, en Grèce*…An educated humanist, a member of the Académie d'Inscription, later the Académie Francaise, he dreamed as Nointel did of acquiring a collection of Greek sculptures for France. In Athens he had an agent who acted for him, Louis Fauvel—a consul, painter, and draughtsman. In one of his letters the ambassador orders Fauvel to acquire one of the caryatids from the Erechtheion, and in another he writes quite openly that his agent should not miss any occasion to plunder whatever could be plundered. The fruit of these efforts was extremely poor; probably just one metope from the pediment knocked off by a storm and now kept in the Louvre.

What the French failed to achieve was accomplished by a man whose name provokes the wrath of Hellenophiles to this day: Thomas Bruce Elgin[28]. Byron said of him with biting irony: "*Quod Gothi*[29] *non fecerunt, Scotus fecit*." Appointed the English representative to the High Porte in 1789, Lord Elgin took on the task of moving the sculptures of the Acropolis "to a safer place" with enormous energy, mobilizing all the political and financial means available to him. He managed to obtain permission from the Turkish authorities to make plaster casts and to remove stones with inscriptions and certain minor fragments of sculptures. Scaffolding rises around the Parthenon. Two Italian architects, two specialists in plaster casting (also Italians), the Russian painter Fyodor Ivanovich, somewhat rudely called "Lord Elgin's Kalmuk," and dozens of laborers under the direction of the painter Lusieri[30] went to work. The most intensive period of work falls between 1801 and 1803. These "pieces of stone" mentioned by the Turkish permit[31] can be admired today in the British Museum in London. It is in fact a vast collection, composed of twelve large fragments of the pediment, fifteen metopes, and fifty-six bas-reliefs from a frieze representing a pan-Athenian procession.

Elgin's escapades could form the backdrop for a fascinating novel: the lord's arrest in France, Lusieri's flight at the outbreak of war with the Turks, the wreck of the sailboat transporting the priceless cargo and the retrieval of the sculptures by sponge divers; then finally the polemics and discussions dragging on in Parliament and the press for many years, weighing the moral, aesthetic, and financial aspects of the whole affair. In the end it was not until 1816 that the English state purchased the collection (Elgin demanded a hundred thirty-six thousand pounds) for the sum of a hundred thirty-five thousand pounds sterling. It was a tremendous sum for those days, and a section of the British press gave vent to irritation, portraying John Bull in satirical cartoons amid his impoverished family, which is crying: "Don't buy those stones, Pa, give us bread."

We have said that consideration was also given to the aesthetic value of the sculptures of Phidias and his school. It

may be assumed that if the marbles acquired by Lord Elgin had derived from the Hellenistic era, the British government might have been less tightfisted.

There were many enthusiastic voices, but a commission composed of the best British artists of the time judged the work of Phidias and his school to stand just below the Apollo Belvedere or the Laocoön group.

At the turn of the eighteenth to the nineteenth century a new kind of tourist appears in Greece. Many sketches represent an exalted youth dressed in a black cloak, leaning on a broken column and gazing, melancholy, at a scattered herd of sheep among the marble ruins. "O Solon! O Themistocles! A commander of black eunuchs rules over Athens and all the cities of Greece."

This cry escaped from the breast of François-René de Chateaubriand[32]. The author of *The Spirit of the Christian Faith* stopped one day in Sparta and four days in Athens on his journey from Paris to Jerusalem (undertaken in 1806). Posing neither as an archaeologist nor as a sociologist, nor as an art historian, he left us pages in his *Itinéraire de Paris à Jérusalem* which in an incomparable manner evoke Athens a dozen or so years before the end of its enslavement to Turkey.

It is early morning. "[…] Athens, the Acropolis, and the fragments of the Parthenon are colored the loveliest shade of peach blossom; the sculptures of Phidias have stirred, struck lengthwise by a golden ray; the motion of shadows made the bas-reliefs seem to move on the marble; in the distance the sea and Piraeus were flooded with white light; a Corinthian palace reflected the radiance of a new day; it shone on the western horizon like a cliff of crimson and fire."

Chateaubriand was by no means merely a painter of moods. In the company of consul Fauvel—that incomparable connoisseur of Athenian antiquity—he came here to acquire "a clear sense of the buildings, skies, sun, perspectives, earth, sea, rivers, forests and mountains of Attica." He is happy to have been able to correct the image he carried within him, to fill it out with color and scent, and light.

He is struck above all by the power and harmony of the Parthenon. He admires Iktinos, who managed to unite Doric gravity with Corinthian lightness of construction, setting heavy baseless columns on the three massive steps of the stylobate, which gave the temple both serenity and grace. He rightly says that the harmony of the whole is the result of a feel for the proper relations of architecture and its environment, as well as the perfection of the separate parts.

Chateaubriand's account, his precision, interest in technical details, and the literary excellence of his descriptions put him in the first line of travelers to Greece in the "pre-archeological era." He did not avoid all errors (how easy it is to hold them against him now), as he, prompted by Spon's account, ascribes the sculptures of the Parthenon pediment to artists from the age of Hadrian. But guided by an accurate intuition he also says that it is impossible that Phidias would have left both pediments bare.

Sympathy for the fatherland of Europe held in bondage, repeated by so many Romantics, gives rise to the following kind of scene from Chateaubriand's pen: "Dizdar, or the commander, personifies the monster guarding Solon's people. He lives in a citadel filled with masterpieces of Phidias and Iktinos without even wondering what kind of nation left these remnants, not daring to leave the hovel which he built amid the ruins of Pericles's edifice; only at times does this soulless tyrant drag himself to the door of his hideout, sit cross-legged on a dirty divan and let the smoke of his pipe rise up between the columns of Minerva's temple, gazing mindlessly at the coast of Salamis and Epidauros."

In the spring of 1821 a Greek rebellion against the Turks breaks out. One should not imagine that in the minds of those who grabbed their guns the idea of eternal Hellas—the Greece of the philosophers and artists—was any kind of inspiration or motor for action.

One Philhellene observes with melancholy that in no age was the Greek people so indifferent to the surviving remains of the ancient monuments as in the quarter century before its liberation. The Greek rebels did not fight in the name of

Pericles but in the name of the Nazarene and the four Evangelists. In the course of a dozen or more centuries—as someone rightly said—the eastern Church had preserved its sense of separateness as salt preserves a fish.

Athens was not even an important strategic point anymore. It was a small town that barely counted a few thousand inhabitants. At the time of the fighting the city and the Acropolis citadel pass many times from one side to another. But these are struggles over a symbol, a banner. The fate of the war was decided on other battlefields.

From the beginning the Turks in Athens confine themselves to taking hostages (Easter 1821) and imprisoning them in a Frankish tower. The janissary guard closes off the gates of the city to prevent rebels from entering, but the rebels succeed in gaining control of the city regardless. The rather poor technical equipment of both sides in the fighting, and particularly the chronic lack of artillery on the side of the rebels, was a blessing for the Acropolis as a monument. The besieged side improvised a sally beyond the fortress walls. A Turkish division, led by an enormous Moor straight from the Arabian Nights, unexpectedly launches an attack on the rebels' trenches with a terrifying cry. But this division is decimated and in response the Turks carry out an immediate execution of hostages. The executions are carried out on the wall of Themistocles. The severed heads roll down the hill all the way to the doorsteps of the first houses.*

Pasha Brioni arrives to the aid of those cut off in the fortress at the head of four thousand Albanians. Just as in classical times, the population leaves the city and takes refuge on the island of Salamis. When Brioni withdraws, the Athenians return and the blockade of the fortress is resumed. It is merely the beginning of the murderous *contredance* around the sacred mount.

After nearly a year of siege, the Turks, having exhausted their last supplies of ammunition and water, surrender. Enthusiasm, chaos, mutual killing of Christians and Muslims. Odysseus Androutsos is named commander of the fortress. He is a figure on whom historians have made contradictory

judgments: for some he is a national hero, the victim of a lack of understanding on the part of the leaders of the rebellion, for others a firebrand and a traitor. Archaeologists cannot forgive him for having razed the lion in Cheronea under which Odysseus thought to find a legendary treasure.

The new commander tackled the defense preparations with great energy. Near the Pinakoteka he found an ancient fountain, which was surrounded by a bastion. The commander, following the old great builders, did not neglect to place an inscription reading: "This bastion was built from its foundation by general Odysseus son of Androutsos in the month of September 1822."

No trace remains of the bastion, and its builder suffered a tragic fate. Having quarreled with the rebel leaders, he takes command of a Turkish gang that goes around pillaging Attica. Caught, he is imprisoned in the Frankish tower and then killed. His body, tied up with rope, was thrown out the window to suggest an attempt to escape.*

In the summer of 1826, a black year for the rebellion—the year of the slaughter at Missolunghi—the Turks again lay siege to the Acropolis under the command of Pasha Reshid. Batteries stationed on the Hill of Muses shoot at the western façade of the Parthenon. Musketeers riddle the walls of the Pinakoteka and Propylaea with holes. Hit by a bullet, the cupola of the former harem in the Erechtheion falls, together with the greater part of the fragments of ancient sculpture.

It seems that this time the Acropolis will be dealt a fatal blow, that the history of Morosini will repeat itself. Pasha Reshid, unable to take the fortress by storm, orders his sappers to dig a long tunnel under the hill, which is to serve as a huge mine. In that tunnel the Turks plant three and a half tons of explosives, enough to blow up at least half the citadel. The pasha is certain of success and withdraws his forces from the first line of the siege. But the farsighted Greeks dig twelve deep subterranean moats which neutralize the force of the blast. The mountain gave birth to the proverbial mouse.

Now colonel Charles Fabvier appears in the theater of war. This French career officer born in Lorraine ordered himself

painted in a turban, a sheepskin jacket, and with a big curved broadsword at his side. Apart from his Romantic enthusiasm Fabvier brought in an invaluable quality—a good knowledge of warcraft and a rationalistic approach to military tasks. He organizes the regular divisions of rebels. He introduces the idea of order and discipline to the anachronistic and amateuristic leadership.

In the winter of 1827 he takes command of a modest size corps whose task is to help those besieged in the Athenian fortress. It is a strange expedition, consisting less of reinforcement to the defensive garrison than the transport of military supplies. The division led by Fabvier is almost unarmed, but it is weighed down almost to the limit of human endurance with sacks of gunpowder and cartridges. It is worth quoting the commander's dry account: "With the Philhellenes at the front we made our way up to half a bullet shot's distance from the Turkish trenches; they were deep and well guarded. An hour before midnight; a full moon. When we were sighted, we moved our step as if to attack, but with unloaded guns. We ran by the line of trenches and the terrain separating us from the fortress, under quite heavy fire of case-shots and rifles. We suffered four casualties and twelve wounded."

Fabvier's bold expedition prolonged the defense of the Acropolis to the end of 1827. From a military point of view it was an episode of little weight, but the endurance of the defenders had an enormous moral and political significance. At the moment when the Greeks left the fortress, the fate of their fatherland is sealed. The peace of Adrianopolis concluded in 1829 restores Greece's independence. The Turks, however, do not leave the Acropolis until April 1833. At that time Athens counted three hundred houses and two thousand inhabitants. One of the first acts of king Otto is the demilitarization of the sacred mount. Archaeologists and architects occupy the positions abandoned by soldiers.

In the autumn 1838 issue of the *Revue des Deux Mondes*, there is a letter which gives a good picture of the state of the monuments: "You too, my dear friend, have seen and admired the Acropolis; but to get there today you must pass by a whole ring of fortifications, you must go around the bastion, past one

battery and then another battery. Having made it as far as the foot of the Propylaea, you will look in vain for the Propylaea. You see before you a storehouse of gunpowder, surrounded by thick walls, in the middle of which you can barely make out the imprisoned columns. Continuing along this path through a narrow entrance on the right, you will search in vain for the temple of Wingless Victory. But it was here, you will say to yourself, holding Pausanias's book in hand, it was here, from this point one could see the sea and here Aegeus once—with his gaze directed toward the ships that were to bring his son Theseus, conqueror of the Minotaur—threw himself from the cliff, deceived by the black sails he saw on the horizon. It was here, in this place, that the temple of Wingless Nike should have stood. But the building was razed by the Venetians in 1687, and the Turks scattered the remains, taking the marble and leaving the place itself impossible to recognize. Finding yourself at last on the Acropolis, still searching for the Propylaea, you will want to locate the Pinakoteka, which constituted the left wing of that splendid entrance. Now you will find amid the crumbling Turkish houses but one hall filled with fragments to three quarters of its height. It was in this hall that the architect Stuart attempted to reconstruct the temple of Nike, because it was impossible to find it elsewhere."

In the first years of the monarchy, consideration was given to the problem of where the new royal seat should be located. The German neoclassical architect Karl Friedrich Schinkel projected a new Acropolis. The model of this fortunately unrealized dream still casts us into perplexity and horror. The Parthenon was lost amid an inundation of porticos, columns, and heavy rotundas. In addition, this faux architecture was to be decorated with hanging gardens, rose terraces, groves of cypresses and palm trees. Above a stone decoration (as if from a bad opera) a monument to Athena was to be raised, having little in common with the spirit of Phidias.

Not many tourists who visit the Acropolis today are aware that what they see is the work of more than a hundred years of drudging reconstruction. Here the word reconstruction is misleading. The neologism used to describe the work is *anastylosis*[34], which means raising columns anew, and in the

broader sense of the word means all work associated with putting the authentic fragments of architecture in their original places and fortifying them, in strict accordance with archaeological principles.

Toward the end of the 1830s the first *anastylosis* of the temple of Athena Nike, razed by the Turks, was carried out. However, in the course of this work two cardinal errors were committed: the bastion on which the temple stood was not fortified, nor were the ancient foundations examined. A hundred years later it was necessary to dismantle the building stone by stone and build it again.

In practice, however, the apparently simple principle of *anastylosis* creates a number of almost intractable problems. The Greek architect Balanos, who supervised the work on the Acropolis in the twentieth century, describes the difficulties of just one fragment of the Erechtheion's architecture as follows:

"A lithograph by Georgios Soutzos[35] shows the façade with caryatids almost completely destroyed in 1827. In the city Efor Pittakis found the head of a caryatid that had been subjected to conservation treatment by a Bavarian sculptor, Imhoff. A fragment of that caryatid's torso lying next to the eastern side of the temple was found and restored by the Greek sculptor Androulis during the Paccard works in 1844. The vault, completed with new blocks of marble, had been supported by wooden columns, which were replaced in 1872 with iron columns. One of those iron supports passed through a terracotta copy of a caryatid (the original having been taken to London by Lord Elgin) and held up a part of the vault. But the heads of the caryatids, even the one restored in 1844, were in very bad condition, because the poorly fitted iron supports had moved; in addition, it was necessary to replace the caryatid of terracotta with a caryatid of cement. The underlying masonry of the portico also had to be changed. For these various reasons it was decided to take the whole façade apart and put it together again."

The rebuilding of the Greek temples made it possible in practice to become familiar with the secrets of ancient architecture. The first accurate measurement of the Parthenon

was carried out in 1845 by the English scholar Francis Cranmer Penrose. He caught the subtle optical corrections, for example the stylobate's slight diversion from the horizontal line, which came to 228 millimeters, which is one thousandth of the breadth of this main temple of the Acropolis. What for long centuries had passed for a work of cold geometry in fact turned out to be a complex play of curved lines.

The anastylosis of the Parthenon led by Balanos facilitated the discovery that the drums which form a column were marked in antiquity with the same letter or symbol to indicate the order in which they should be laid on top of each other. Parts missing from columns were replaced with cement casts, because new marble would not have had the famed golden patina of the Parthenon. The works demanded great, one would almost say clockmaker's precision. New oiled blocks of the architrave, necessary to fortify the construction, were inserted exactly in the place of the missing fragments. With admirable tact they restrained themselves from a complete reconstruction, which might have changed the Parthenon into a cheerless citadel of academic classicism.

High up on the hill—there it is!

An inner cry in a clear and almost triumphant voice.

The road was long and winding and the chance that I would reach my destination—negligible. I had to overcome obstacles, office walls, closed doors, corridors, and a whole pack of petty Cerberuses behind desks, hesitating over whether to bring down the magic stamp, holding and braiding the thread of my adventure in their fingers.

And after all, I could content myself with the accounts of others, the testimonies of experts, I could agree that the object of our dreams will always be beyond reach of sight and touch. Why then this overwhelming will to confront it, this passion driving me toward physical proximity, possession, feeling with my hands, uniting bodily, and then tearing myself away, leaving and taking with me—what? An image? A shudder?

I never ceased to believe that the Acropolis really existed; a face to face encounter with it was not necessary to reinforce

that faith. The Acropolis was a true miracle. It didn't lead my senses into temptation, it didn't promise that it would be something it was not. It fulfilled itself entirely, was equal to itself.

I repeated to myself the awkward formula: it is and I am, and the vast expanse of time separating the dates of our birth contracted, vanished. We were contemporaries.

I got to Athens in the late afternoon. The search for a hotel, the irritations of luggage, the first uncertain wandering through the city. The loss of precious time writing postcards, drinking coffee, looking at exhibitions. I was aware that subconsciously I was postponing the moment of encounter with the Acropolis, as if I were trying to sharpen my powers of sensation.

Night had fallen. The area around the hill was almost deserted. If I remember the moment rightly, I began to count, simply to count the columns—eight, seventeen, and again eight, seventeen, exactly the number we drew in our school exercise books. As if I wanted to accept that unexpected inheritance coolly, rationally.

Soon I realized that two Acropolises existed inside me: by day and by night. The first was analytical, my face in the guidebook. Checking the map, studying the structure of the whole, touching stones, imagining what was lost—a little like examining the anatomy of an animal found on a dig.

The first efforts to assimilate and develop a personal relationship to the monument. I chose "for myself" the Propylaea and Parthenon, for their grandeur, mass, and order. The Temple of Nike was too dainty for me to feel its stone materiality, it gave the impression of a successful copy, a good elaboration on a classical theme. Hardest for me was coming to an understanding with the Erechtheion. The caryatid portico was marred by the metal support pipes, which deprived the building of its meaning and intended lightness. The caryatids themselves, mutilated and stripped of grace, were as if frozen halfway between columns and human shapes. Above the dark pool of old Athenian cults this Ionian temple seems to speak of the futility of marrying an old faith with a new form of architectural expression.

The second Acropolis, nocturnal, lit up in the sky, gave itself to be viewed as a whole. I sat on the Hill of Muses right by the monument of Philopappos. From the poor district of Plaka below me, a banal and quotidian babble reached me. The white houses glowed with chalk in the dark. A smell of lamb, olive oil, and garlic floated in the air. The Acropolis in a wreath of onion smells. On the left, among the trees, a performance called "Son et Lumière" was taking place. The choruses of Sophocles cried by turns in French and English. The light picked out fragments of the sacred mount from the night. A red glare thrown by reflectors imitated fires.

To me the Acropolis was then like a sculpture; not an architectural ensemble but a sculpture. The ruined southern colonnade of the Parthenon, the stumps of columns cut off low, made my heart contract. The stone fought against the encroaching void.

From the aesthetic sphere the Acropolis moved in my consciousness into the sphere of history. I could neither have the feelings nor say the prayer of the nineteenth-century humanist. I could not make myself speak the words of the rationalist faith: "*O noblesse, o beaut*[36]*é simple et vraie! Déesse dont le culte signifie raison et sagesse, toi dont le temple est une leçon éternelle de conscience et de sincérité.*"

The Acropolis I had before my eyes, reduced to a skeleton, stripped of its flesh, was for me equally a work of will and harmony and of chaos, artists and history—the work of Pericles and Morosini, Iktinos and the looters. And touching its wounds and mutilations with my eye, I felt an emotion in which admiration was mixed with pity.

If I drew from this a strange feeling, the happiness of the endangered, it probably was because I was conscious of the extraordinary fact that "I made it" before the Acropolis and I shared the fate of all human creations on the dark promontory of time, faced with an unknown future.

THE SAMOS AFFAIR

for Miroslaw Holub

A PIECE OF EARTH torn from the Asian continent—the island Samos, on the waves of the Aegean Sea, here beautifully named the Sea of Icarus. The distance dividing the Eastern promontory of the island from the Turkish mainland is so negligible that on a fine day a seasoned swimmer can make the crossing without any great effort.

The island has an elongated shape. On its northeastern side the sea carves its way inland, creating a bay. Here is the main harbor and the capital, which carries the same name as the island.

The terrain is mountainous. Strabo, emphasizing its mountainousness, explains that *samos* means hill. The greatest elevations are in the western part of Samos. Open to the East, it defends itself in the West by a chain of mountains, the Kerketevs, which attain 1400 meters and fall steeply down to the sea.

Samos is not quite 500 square kilometers, which makes it a mere crumb on the scale of great empires. But the island's significance exceeds its natural dimensions.

Colonized by the Greeks in approximately 1000 B.C., Samos became the center of Ionian culture long before the time of Athens' glory. Great sacred buildings, among them the enormous Heraion, were built in the 8th century B.C. That temple, renovated in the 7th century and then reconstructed around 560 B.C. by the architects Roikos and Teodoros, was the largest sanctuary of Greece at that time, its measurements

imposing: 102 meters long and 52 meters wide. In Herodotus's time the island's capital, laid out like an amphitheater on the sea, was considered one of the most beautiful cities in the world.

In the period when Athens had but a modest number of ships, the mighty Samian fleet reigned supreme on the Aegean, extending its reach to Sicily, Epirus, and many overseas colonies. The rulers of Samos maintained friendly relations with Egypt and were treated as equals by Oriental satraps.

Samos was the fatherland of great builders, engineers, and artists. A famous school of sculpture and ceramics was born here, and it was here that the art of melting iron and bronze was brought to perfection. The fame of Samian architects was unequaled. To this day we may admire a sluice hewn from a cliff, dating back to the times of Polycrates. When Darius decided to build a bridge across the Danube, he entrusted the supervision of the work to Samian architects.

At the "Renaissance" court of Polycrates, tyrant of Samos, son of a merchant, enemy of aristocrats, patron of the arts, there were also poets like Anacreon and Ibikos. History has also passed down the names of many famous Samian painters: Calliphon, Teodoros, Timotes, Agatarkhos. The latter was also active in Athens and according to tradition introduced painting to the theater (he was also the author of a lost treatise on theater design).

Philosophers were born on Samos: Pythagoras and Melissus, as well as the historians Pageos and Duris.

The list of Samian worthies can be extended significantly. It should really begin with the name of Hera, who was said to have been born on the bank of the Imbrasos river.

WE WILL NOW BREAK with the custom of describing ancient stones. The reason for this is straightforward—I do not know the island by autopsy, unless you count pre-World War I postcards. They show a Doric column without a capital, lonely

as a factory chimney, amid an arid landscape backed by a burnt sky.

We will concern ourselves here with a certain historical episode called the rebellion or insurrection of Samos. It occupies a brief segment of time from 440 to 439 B.C. and many historians have squeezed it into the margins of Greek history. However, to us the event seems more crucial and more fraught with consequences than specialists would have it.

We will try to reconstruct this history from contradictory sources and accounts, without concealing our sympathy for the defeated.

And so two great Ionian cities—Samos and Miletus—found themselves in constant conflict. The apple of contention was Priene, hometown of Bias, one of the Seven Sages, situated on the coast of Asia Minor near the estuary of the Meander. Conflicts between Greek towns were reminiscent of family quarrels, in which it is hard to track what the real causes are and "who started it." Both sides of the quarrel belonged to the Delian League, later called the Athenian Maritime League. Formally all the League's members, and there were more than 200 of them, had equal rights and each held one vote at the League Council Assemblies. In fact, Athens had the deciding vote as a result of its actual power advantage.

In the conflict between Samos and Miletus, common sense dictated that Athens limit itself to the role of arbiter and not take up a position on either side. It is hard to explain why Pericles, a seasoned politician after all, let himself be pulled into this perilous game—unless we accept the gossip of Plutarch, who says it was at the instigation of his wife Aspasia, who came from Miletus. Either way, Athens declared itself against Samos, awarding the city Priene, subject of the quarrel, to Miletus. The Samians felt wronged and did not accept the decision. The arbitrary Athenian policy brought into question their position as a free state. There were rumors that the Samian government would not submit but would fight for its rights, even that it would secede from the Athenian League, which would be a dangerous precedent, as such a step might

be followed by a chain of insurrections by other Greek cities against the Athenians. Therefore Pericles decided to act quickly and decisively, which is to say, conduct a policy of intervention.

In the summer of 440 B.C. an expeditionary corps of forty triremes sailed from Piraeus to chasten the rebels.

The first act of the Samian drama was played out at the speed of lightning. The surprised island fell into the hands of the Athenians, who dismissed the existing government, created a new one that gave a guarantee of loyalty, left a garrison on the island and took the fifty most prominent citizens and an equal number of children as hostages and sent them off to the island Lemnos.

The question seemed to be settled definitively. Pericles's apologist says that the Athenians set up a democratic government on Samos and sailed back to Athens. It sounds as slick as a report on a school field trip.

However, some Samians fled from the invasion and sought aid in Asia Minor at the court of Pissouthnes, then the military commander of Sardis. Having gathered reinforcements to the tune of 700 men, they then made a night landing on the island, overthrew the government imposed on them, brought back the hostages from Lemnos and handed over the Athenian crew to the Persians.

From a minor little episode of the kind in which Greek history abounds it turned into a serious matter, particularly after Byzantium—a colony situated on the northern edges of the Greek world, but at a point of strategic and economic importance—had allied itself with the rebels. Pericles decided to act decisively, before an anti-Athenian coalition could be formed.

The year 440 B.C.: the second expedition and intervention against Samos. The operation was fashioned on a large scale not only because its fleet had the participation of more units than in the first expedition, but also—and this is the moment of political significance—because other members of the League took part in the military action on the side of Athens.

Thucydides remarks characteristically that Pericles sent his war ships to Chios and Lesbos to summon those states to take part in the war. That summons must have been quite categorical.

With his native deftness, Pericles carried out a diplomatic action parallel to his military operations, aiming to isolate Samos in what one might call the international arena, so that the whole affair might be contained within Greek borders. To secure the neutrality of the Persian satraps with certain sums derived from the League's treasury (the Athenian commander accounted for this kind of expenditure before the Athenian Assembly with the simple formula "unavoidable expenses") still falls within the bounds of acceptability. On the other hand, giving the Persians Greek lands on the Karian coast oversteps those bounds considerably.

The second Samian war was waged with varying success. Pericles set out for the island at the head of sixty ships and engaged in a victorious battle with the enemy fleet near the island of Tragia. However, the opponent was not conquered militarily nor did he lose the spirit of resistance, although Athenian troops landed on Samos and began a long siege of the city from the sea side. Forty ships from Athens and twenty-five from Chios and Lesbos came to the aid of the interventionary fleet.

Having heard that Phoenician ships were sailing to the island's rescue (which was not true—Samos was completely isolated throughout the whole conflict), Pericles selected sixty ships from those blockading the city and sailed along the Karian coast to cut off the Phoenicians.

At that moment the besieged city immediately launched a counterattack. In an unexpected sally that completely surprised the Athenians, they managed to destroy the guard vessels and fight a victorious land battle with their opponents, many of whom were taken as prisoners of war. The sea was open again and it was again possible to provide themselves with food and materials they needed to carry on a war. The sky over Samos was then the color of hope. It lasted all of fourteen days.

Pericles returned with his fleet and the ruthless blockade began once again. From Athens, Chios, and Lesbos new and powerful reinforcements arrived, numbering ninety ships.

In the ninth month of the siege, the island, exhausted by the war, surrendered. This took place in the spring of 439 B.C.

The terms of capitulation were excessively severe. The Samians had to knock down their city walls, surrender their fleet, give up hostages, and pay the costs of war, which were set at the dizzying sum of about eight and a half million drachmas. A Greek garrison was placed on the island and Samos lost its status as a city allied to the League.

One of the Athenian strategists who took part in the expedition was a man who owed his fame not to military superiority but to achievements quite contrary to the spirit of war. In Greece there was no such thing as a professional general. This explains why Sophocles was granted the dubious honor of being a strategist in this fratricidal war, all on account of the success his *Antigone* had enjoyed in the theater. We don't know exactly what kind of commander the poet was. Ancient gossips have passed on a joke according to which what most excited him in the whole war was the presence of a large number of young men.

The philosopher Melissus, son of Itagenes, was on the other side of the front. Melissus was a fine commander. His tactical abilities, his surprise moves and lightning-quick sallies won him respectful recognition, even in the enemy camp. Melissus was, as it was said, a professional philosopher, and—even more oddly—a follower of the doctrine of Parmenides, which holds that being is one, eternal, unlimited, infinite, and unmoving. In accordance with the master's doctrine, Melissus thought that every change, every becoming, every movement is nothing more than an illusion. In spite of that he was a leader in heart and soul, and at least his leadership in battle was not a play of appearances.

No, this war was not a dialogue between poet and philosopher. It was full of real death, real wounds, real courage and cowardice. We imagine ancient battles along operatic lines as not completely serious, and historical films have

contributed not a little to this image. There the men go running across a field dressed in comical outfits, holding anachronistic killing tools in their hands. For us, all that blood has the hue of a faded fresco.

We don't know the number of fallen, even approximately, and even if we did know, our imaginations fed on great numbers, our sensibilities blunted by so many murderous battles between white men, would remain unaffected.

At the time of the Samian war they did not do without barbarian cruelties, with which both sides, both conquerors and conquered, reproach each other. The Samians, according to Plutarch, burned the sign of the owl on the foreheads of Athenian prisoners of war, and in revenge, the Athenians branded the defenders of the island they captured with the sign of the samaena, the famous war ship with an upturned prow in the shape of a boar's snout and a paunchlike hull.

The historian Duris (not a contemporary of the events, it is true) reports that the commanders of the Samian ships were taken to Miletus after their defeat in the war. There they were executed. They were bound to crosses in the marketplace for ten days. When they were completely exhausted, they were beaten over the head with clubs and their remains cast unburied on the ground. Duris was from Samos. Pericles's apologist said he exaggerated the misfortunes of his homeland in order to give the Athenians a bad name.

Pericles returned to Athens wearing the victor's wreath. The expression is metaphorical, of course, and taken from Roman custom. In any case, the enthusiasm of the multitudes was uncommonly loud, as always when a victory is ambiguous. History has preserved a revealing episode whose heroine is Elpinice, then a woman more than seventy years old, the sister of Cimon and the widow of Callias. She must have been an extraordinary woman; there are unlikely and slanderous stories about her life, probably because she was of more than average courage and intelligence. Contrary to the customs of Athenian women, her interests extended far beyond the boundaries of the domestic. She dared—and this no doubt caused holy terror—to speak out on public affairs, which were

reserved for men. Among other things it is said of her that she played an intermediary role in the short "truce" between Cimon and Pericles in 461 B.C.

And so amid the general enthusiasm, when women were crowning Pericles and decorating him with ribbons, "as if he were some sort of champion wrestler," Elpinice went to him and said:

"Verily, you well deserve admiration and these wreaths, Pericles, for having lost us so many brave citizens, and not in a war with Phoenicia or Persia, like my brother Cimon, but while restoring order in a city tied to us with bonds of alliance and blood."

Plutarch reports that Pericles got out of it with a quotation from Archilochus, a quotation which was neither to the point nor particularly elegant: "Don't rub yourself with perfumes, since you are so old."

Not everyone in Athens saw the matter as clearly as their Cassandra, Elpinice. The stormy waves of the Peloponnesian war were nearing the walls of the city. Athens barely had a few years left to dream of power. Only on the surface did things seem to be going well in this best of worlds. Samos, like Euboea several years earlier, had been conquered and humiliated, Athens's superiority had been confirmed once again, but hatred toward the victors was growing, especially in the eastern part of the empire, after the shameful cession of Greek lands to the Karian Persians.

And Maria Delcourt, author of a fine monograph on Pericles, is probably right when she says that it was precisely from this seemingly modest little war that the decline of the Maritime League began, as well as the eventide of Periclean politics.

The aim of the Athenian League, formed after the battle of Salamis, was, as we know, to liberate the Ionian cities and protect them against Persian invasion. But when the danger of a barbarian attack passed, the League's treasury was moved from Delos to Athens and became an instrument of Athenian politics. The institution turned out to be longer lasting than the

aims which prompted its creation. A case familiar not only from ancient history.

One of the fundamental flaws of the League, which was after all a voluntary league, was the fact that no one could leave it without risking war. The allied city-states had to acknowledge the actual supremacy of Athens; one can best follow this in the sphere of economic pressures.

Most of the cities paid from one to three talents annually into the common treasury—which is to say a manageable sum, especially if you take inflation into account. But that amount could be raised at will, and the tribute imposed on Samos after its failed rebellion was set at eight talents annually, to which were added the costs of war the rebels had to pay Athens, a sum of a thousand talents—taken together, a ruinous burden even for the most prosperous city-state. For the same reasons (an insurrection against Athens) Aegina paid thirty talents. After a certain time the tribute was lowered to thirteen, later even to eight talents. There was something in this practice that could be called a premium for loyalty.

Arbitrariness in the determination of financial dues was not only an instrument of Athenian policy, it also occurred where no political factors came into play. It's hard to explain why Thasos paid thirty, and the significantly wealthier Byzantium paid only fifteen talents. This fiscal lawlessness surely did not add to the Athenians' popularity.

The comedian Telecleides says that "The Athenians gave Pericles…[1]

With the cities' assessments the cities themselves,

to bind or release as he pleases,

Their ramparts of stone to build up if he likes,

and then to pull down again straightaway,

Their treaties, their forces, their might, peace,

and riches, and all the fair gifts of good fortune.

One of the things that people and peoples find most difficult to forgive, if they can forgive at all, is humiliation. A sudden military defeat on a battlefield is still acceptable, because it can always be attributed to the opponent's superior force, to surprise or the ineptitude of one's own commanders. But wounded pride doesn't heal easily.

The Athenian repertoire for humiliating the conquered included—along with placing military colonies in a country of uncertain allegiance—the demolition of the conquered city's walls. This is what happened with Samos and Aegina. A city without walls was exposed to ridicule, dependent on the care of an imposed protector and deprived of defenses against any invader. This policy was as absurd as it was shortsighted. Alcibiades, a relative of Pericles, understood these matters better when in 417 B.C. he negotiated an alliance with Argos, promising to build a long wall connecting the city to the sea, modeled after the long wall of Athens. No one was under the illusion that Alcibiades was treating Argos, or later Patras, with disinterested love.

And so Athens was victorious in the war with Samos, but it was a morally and politically dubious victory. The official enthusiasm was tremendous. Pericles—as Ion writes—was extraordinarily proud in saying "Agamemnon spent ten years conquering a barbarian city, and [I] conquered the pre-eminent and most powerful Ionian city in nine months!" In all fairness, let us add that this arrogant self-praise does not really accord with what we know of Pericles, and should be attributed to some street flatterer.

Athens was not only the cradle of democracy, but also the homeland of rhetors and sophists. If you can't push through a policy which prompts moral reservations and may even be morally reprehensible, you have to come up with a term which will serve to veil the evil to some extent. In such hehavior we perceive elements of magic—the belief that the foundations of the world are not only things and events but that the word has a reconstitutive and creative power. In his *History of Greek Culture*, Jacob Burckhardt writes admiringly, but also ironically, of the Athenians' ability to speak of the worst matters with prudent delicacy, their capacity for inventing

euphemisms. And so a prison is called a residence, tribute is called surcharge, an occupation is called a defense.

The traditional voice of public opinion was Attic comedy, the artistic realization of the principle that states that the citizen of a democratic state has the right to criticize politicians and institutions. It is worth reflecting on the fact that the immediate consequence of the Samian war was the introduction of censorship—the first in Athenian history—which forbade comic poets to represent persons on stage under their real names. This is not at all an insignificant detail. It testifies to a profound internal crisis beginning to show.

The drastic controls on freedom of speech prove that the popular mood must have in fact been quite different from the official enthusiasm and optimism. It is more than probable that critical voices were raised and that Elpinice—a fine example of civic conscience—was not an exception.

Historians defend Pericles, saying he was not the author of the decree on censorship. It seems that the act was voted through the popular assembly at a time when he was absent from Athens. Finally—his defenders say—the ban itself didn't hold up and after a certain time (two theatrical seasons) this practice unworthy of the homeland of democracy was abandoned.

The homeland of democracy? Yes, amid a sea of barbarism it was a homeland of democracy, even if it sometimes imposed its will on others; fixated on its ideal, its mission, its own single right path, onto which it attempted to lead the bickering little world of Greek particularisms.

It has not been our undertaking to ply the reader with the dubious satisfaction that in history no case is clear-cut, that violence often hides behind slogans of freedom, which for some is a convenient justification for present and future excesses of word and force. Because if even Pericles himself was at times an "imperialist"…

What use may there be then in recalling this remote affair; what moral emerges from this account of how the island Samos was brought under the yoke? The following, I think:

invaders returning from a war carry in the folds of their uniforms, on the soles of their boots, the germ of a disease which will infect their own society, their own freedoms.

ON THE ETRUSCANS

THE ETRUSCANS ARE fashionable, as if they had only just been discovered, as if they were the latest revelation of Mediterranean archaeology. Interest in this mysterious civilization extends beyond scientific circles. Names of ruined Etruscan towns appear in the pages of daily papers with exciting but false information on the final deciphering of their script. Writers of many nations produce novels resurrecting the tragic history of these predecessors of the Romans. Guidebooks to Italy praise towns which until recently were off the traditional tourist trails: Volterra, Tarquinia, Veii. It is neither the last nor the first wave of Etruscomania.

Archaeologists and historians have managed to reconstruct the history of the Etruscans in Italy from the ninth century B.C. Between the rivers Tiber, Arno, and the coast of the Tyrrhenian Sea they created the first historical civilization before the Romans. "Such was Etruria's power that its fame spread across earth and sea from one side of Italy to the other, from the Alps to the coast of Messina[1]" says Titus Livy. After a period of splendor lasting several centuries, the decline of this shortlived empire—if one may call it that—began around the fourth century B.C. By the second century B.C. Etruria has been completely consumed and digested by the mighty Romans. The conquerors' historians labor to efface the role of the conquered. We, the heirs of the crime and the cover-up, try to mete out justice to the past; to give back a voice to history's great mutes, the peoples who had bad luck in history.

Asked what events or developments in ancient history we consider most important, we would without hesitation name the war of the Greeks with the Persians and the Roman conquests. The great authorities among Greek and Roman

historians lend their weight to this. That is surely why the incomparably important process of the colonization of the Mediterranean Sea basin, lasting from the dawn of historical time, is marked so hazily in our consciousness. For the historians themselves this great adventure is like a fresco worn away in many places, a many-layered palimpsest, painted by the hands of the Greeks, Phoenicians, Etruscans, Carthaginians, Romans, casting up on the surface of history little-known peoples, who have left only their names and the memory of their defeat.

At the beginning of the first millenium B.C. the population of Italy lived on the level of prehistoric cultures, having remained with the population of Europe as a whole outside the great centers of Eastern civilization. Its villages thinly scattered on the peninsula, or at most its fortified settlements on hilltops, were inhabited by farmers and shepherds who used primitive instruments made of bronze and copper. In the ninth century B.C., and perhaps not until the eighth B.C., Italy was woken from its long prehistoric slumber by the Etruscans. From the Po River Valley all the way to the Campagna, along the Tyrrhenian Sea coast, populous cities arise, trade develops, metallurgy is born, great art flourishes for the first time on the peninsula. The Etruscans have all the conditions necessary to become a great power of Mediterranean civilization: fertile earth and mines, an army and a fleet. The ancients credited them with an array of important inventions in the sphere of navigation, among them the invention of the anchor—and even if this is not accurate information, it indicates that the Etruscans occupied an honorable position among ancient maritime powers.

Latium, the cradle of Roman power, is a land of no great significance until the middle of the seventh century B.C., inhabited by forty tribes which maintain pretty loose relations with each other. What was eternal Rome before Clio spoke? A couple of meager villages on the famous Seven Hills and a population of mixed ancestry and customs, living in a state close to barbarism.

We should send Romulus and Remus to the museum of myths along with their wet-nurse and say that the true creators

of Rome were the Etruscans. They easily dominated the Latins and founded the capital of the future empire, which between 616 and 510 was governed by the Etruscan dynasty of Tarquin. The fact that during that period Rome was an Etruscan city is not in the least a hypothesis; it is confirmed by the latest archaeological discoveries. Not only did they find Attic ceramics similar to those found in Etruscan cities, but also remains of the oldest walls which tradition attributes to Servius Tullius, the second of the kings in the Tarquin dynasty. The Cloaca Maxima[2], which drains the swampy terrain of the Forum, is the work of Etruscan engineers. On the Capitol under what is now a conservationists' museum, a temple of Jupiter was discovered with the triple *cella* characteristic of Tuscan building. Two Etruscan inscriptions brought to light a few years ago in Rome prove that Etruscan was also spoken in this city. Perhaps the name Rome doesn't derive from Romulus but from the Etruscan family Ruma; it is already certain that the oldest Roman symbol—that she-wolf—is an Etruscan bronze from the fifth century B.C.

The Latins did not immediately constitute either competition or danger for the Etruscans. The real enemies of the Etruscans were the Greeks.

Traditionally the Etruscans are placed between the Arno and the Tiber. In fact, their real center was what is now Tuscany, but their appetites extended far beyond it. To the North there was Lombardy—the granary of Italy—and to the South, the Campagna. The Etruscans conquer Corsica and Sardinia. If we believe Diodorus of Sicily, they also planned to colonize a fairy tale island that lay in the ocean beyond the column of Hercules (probably Madeira or one of the Canary Islands)—on the far edges of their world.

The colonizers were preceded by ordinary merchants. For archaeologists the visible sign of the Etruscans' presence is the characteristic Tuscan black *bucchero*, which has been dug up in Marseille, on the Iberian peninsula, and in Carthage.

Very early on the paths of the Etruscans and the Greeks crossed like swords. Already the first Greek colonizers meet the Tuscans in eastern Sicily; the fight for the Liparian islands

breaks out. In the Campagna, the Greeks manage to hold on to the port of Cume not far from Etruscan Capua, in the middle of an enemy country. The Etruscans ally themselves with the Carthaginians and defeat the Greek fleet off the coast of Corsica in 540 B.C. The victory is not at all conclusive and the fragile balance of power was barely to last a few decades.

The 5th century B.C. augurs the beginning of the Etruscans' long death throes. The loss of Rome would not have been so ominous for them if it had not meant the birth of the future rulers of the world. The Romans, having subjugated Latium, procede almost immediately to attack nearby Veii. The accounts of the battles of those two cities found in Roman historians, and in Titus Livy in particular, are an eloquent testimony to the fact that it was then that the Roman idea of world conquest sent up its first shoots. It is as if the dramatic and epic description of the struggles lasting a hundred years had been modeled on the Trojan War. The city finally falls in 396 B.C. (after a ten-year siege like Troy's), the population is enslaved or massacred; Juno's statue will adorn a newly built Roman temple on the Aventine Hill. Etruria's fate is cast. The fall of the great Etruscan cities: Tarquinia, Caere, Vulci, Volsinia, is only a matter of time.

That very same day—as Nepos reports—when the cruel Marcus Furius Camillus takes Veii, hordes of Celts break into the Po River Valley. The encirclement of Etruria is then complete. True, the Celts are immediately satisfied with their conquest of the fertile valley (where they create Cisalpine Gaul) but they plague the country with their predatory raids. Despite its cruelties, war with the Romans is a war between two sides of equal stature, partners drawn together by their level of civilization. They could apply the customary tactical principles and games of diplomacy. These anarchic bands of barbarians came down like hail, drought, and pestilence. They must have awoken the same feeling of terror and helplessness as the Vikings invading medieval Europe.

When we speak of the Etruscans fighting the Romans we are guilty of a misleading generalization. In fact, Etruria was never a state in the contemporary meaning of the word, but a confederation of cities and the territories subject to them,

without a clear political center, just as was the case in ancient Greece. Although the phenomenon of hegemony existed (Tarquinia, Caere, later Chiusi), each city conducted its own politics. This facilitated things immeasurably for the Romans. No united Etruscan armies ever engaged with the Romans. At a time when some cities were in mortal danger, others made pacts with the Romans or watched with indifference as their neighbors suffered a catastrophe. The Etruscans were also unable to use the temporary defeats of their opponents to their own advantage, say, at the time of the Samnite wars. The Romans on the other hand eliminated one point of resistance after another, methodically, with Latin consistency. If they signed a truce, it was to prepare for the next campaign. Peace to the Etruscans meant fatalistically waiting for a blow. Their strategy was a desperate defense.

It may be that the image of the Etruscans' fate is a result of our seeing them exclusively in the light of foreign sources. It is as if they are the object of history, not a conscious subject, justifying themselves, explaining their defeats, appealing to their heirs to judge them kindly, to grant them the grace of understanding.

Even if we assume we know all the essential facts of Etruscan history, how pale and abstract their story seems in comparison with the history of Rome, full of vivid personalities—heroes, senators, and generals. But that lack is made good by a new view of the history of the human race and points to the biological character of civilizational phenomena. The history of the Etruscans is like the history of an extinct animal species. A high, seemingly inhuman point of observation.

At first the Etruscan city-states were monarchies, headed by a sovereign, the *lucumo*, who held religious, legislative, military—and thus absolute—power. The crisis of that power, like that of Rome, became visible between the sixth and fifth century B.C. and just as they do throughout the world, the symbols turned out to be more long-lived than their original meanings. The gold crown, *sella curulis*—a throne adorned with ivory, lictor's rods and the two-sided ax (similar to the Minoan) were "borrowed" by the Romans and became the

attributes of higher officials and victors. In Etruria the original monarchy was transformed into the rule of an oligarchy protecting its privileges against the threat of autocracy and plebeian movements, which despite rebellions—for example, the one in Volsinia in 264—didn't manage to bring any change to the rigid and complex social system. The gradual elimination of differences between the patriciate and the plebes which we know from the first centuries of the Roman Republic was alien to the aristocratic Etruscan state. Even admired artists, Greek artisans who had settled in Tuscany early on, had the status of metics in that country. And what to say of the slaves? Their fate was no better than it was in any other ancient state; the bloodily suppressed rebellions testify to that. One should not put any faith in tales of the Etruscans' gentleness told by sentimental novelists or scenes from frescoes (like films of upper-class life), where wine tasters, flutists, and dancers bustle around a feast table. The thousands of little statues of Etruscan warriors you find in Italian museums simultaneously evoke a feeling of delight and mild pity. Their tanned bodies, handsome heads crowned with helmets, spears held lightly as feathers are more reminiscent of ballet dancers than bloodthirsty soldiers. Despite this aesthetic air it seems that the Tyrrhenian army was quite warlike and it was certainly well equipped and organized. A bronze found in the vicinity of Bologna portrays it on the march. At the head is the cavalry, then the infantry, clearly divided into three battle-arrays: first strike and two rows of heavy armor. The procession is closed by lightly armed soldiers. It corresponds exactly to the division of Roman legions into *hastati*[3], *principes*[4], and *triarii*[5]. Even in this field the Etruscans became—to their own perdition—tutors to the Romans.

But what are strategy and armor when faced with the thunder of a god and fates cast on high? The Etruscans were undoubtedly one of the most religious of ancient peoples, but their faith, if it even sent them consolation, surely did not lend them wings, like Arabs or Jews. On the contrary, it seemed to entangle its followers in a thick net of fatalisms.

In contrast to the Greek and Roman religions, it was a revealed religion. One day a supernatural being appeared from

a furrow of earth before the eyes of the astonished farmer Tarchon, the founder of Tarquinia. It was the god Tages. He had the body of a child but the wisdom of an aged man. People came running at Tarchon's terrified cry. Tages began his teaching.

What we know of the Etruscan religion we owe to Roman, Greek, and Byzantine commentaries. They derive from a later age when the Tyrrhenians' civilization had already died out. That is probably what explains the scanty reports about what constitutes the essence of the religion, that is, its metaphysics and morality. The attention of commentators was concentrated on its—if one may use such a phrase—technical side: fortune-telling, in accordance with the ancients' view of Etruria—*genetrix*[6] *et mater superstitionum*.

Etruscan discipline—as it was called by Roman interpreters—was a gathering of prescriptions regulating relations between gods and people, and it was mainly based on the interpretation of signs. Between the human microcosmos and the macrocosmos of the gods there were precise, formal connections codified in that discipline. Priests were charged with telling the fortunes of people and of *the* people.

The Etruscans' sacred books—even if their tradition was initially oral, like the tradition of Celtic druids—were divided into three fundamental works: the *Libri haruspicini*, which treated of the art of auguring from the innards (mainly the liver) of animals, the *Libri fulgurales*, which contained interpretations of thunder, and finally the *Libri rituales*, the most volumnious collection of prescriptions, concerning both the lives of individuals and of society, containing ways to found cities and build temples, a constitution and an index of dreams and miracles.

IN A SMALL MUNICIPAL museum in the town of Piacenza there is a bronze in the shape of a liver, covered with inscriptions. The ancients considered the liver the seat of life; for the Etruscans it was also a miniature of the cosmos. This

bronze, discovered in the 1870s, was a kind of textbook for priests examining the innards of animals. Its surface is divided into meticulously drawn geometrical figures inside of which are inscribed the names of deities. It is therefore both a small atlas of the heavens and a topography of gods in the living body. In all probability the priest examined the liver of a sacrificial animal in detail and any anomaly he noticed was for him a sign, the voice of a specific god.

Gods also spoke in thunderbolts. Nine gods had command of eleven kinds of thunder. Only Tinia (the equivalent of the Roman Jupiter) disposed of three thunderbolts. The first he could hurl of his own volition—that was a warning thunder. The second, dangerous kind could fall if Tinia's twelve divine companions gave their consent. The third—a murderous, destroying fire of the heavens—could only be sent to earth under the condition of acceptance by all the gods called higher gods. This curious collegiality indicates a far-reaching complexity in the heavenly hierarchy and demanded of priests subtle methods of observation. The Tyrrhenians' heavens were divided into sixteen parts. Establishing the point of origin of a lightning flash and the point of earth where a thunderbolt struck permitted Etruscan priests to identify the god speaking.

The description of a religion should not be reduced to an inventory of gods. Making a register of gods and their attributes doesn't tell us very much about what is essential. In the case of the Etruscan religion this is an extraordinarily delicate affair, if one bears in mind the fragmentary documentation and the strong influence of other beliefs, especially from the Greek, Babylonian, and Chaldean religions. In addition, one must take into consideration the profound historical changes to which the Etruscan faith was subject as well as the fact that the individual gods did not have a universal character but were associated with a particular place, a city, a temple.

The chief position in the Etruscan pantheon is occupied by the heavenly trinity Tinia, Uni, and Menerva (its Roman counterparts were the manly triad of Jupiter, Mars, and Quirinus). From Volsinia there was Vertumnus—the youthful god of vegetation, strong and dashing, changing like nature

into a thousand different shapes. The caretaker of the grapevine, honored first in Populonia and later throughout Etruria, went by the sonorous name of Fufluns. His orgiastic cult, extremely popular among the Tyrrhenians, formed a threat to Roman customs, as we learn from a reference in one of their historians. The most prominent female divinity was Turan—the Etruscan embodiment of the mediterranean Mother Goddess—the protectress of women and love.

This sample listing of gods may suggest that the religion of the Etruscans was full of a joyous acceptance of the world. In fact, there was probably no other ancient people—with the possible exception of the Egyptians—so much turned with its face toward a murky other world. Fear, pessimism (constantly deepened by political defeats), the constant presence of death —these are the most characteristic marks of the religion.

Early Etruscan tombs are still filled with scenes of hunting, feasts, dancing, and music. The shades seem to lead a joyful, carefree life. But from the fourth century B.C. on, nocturnal demons, terrifying as birds, crawl across the painted walls of death—Charun and Tuchulcha. The augurs' sepulcher at Tarquinia is a shocking document of cruel funeral games in honor of the deceased. The wall painting portrays two figures fighting (probably slaves), whose blood was supposed to bring relief to the souls of the dead. One of the figures holds a huge dog on a leash and attacks a man with his head tied up in a sack defending himself with a club.

This evident cruelty did not put off the ancients and none of the writers known to us held it against the Etruscans. For that matter, many bloody Roman spectacles, if only the gladiatorial fights, have their origin in Etruria. These things were beyond the sphere of moral sensitivity of the people of those times. On the other hand—and this is typical—the Greeks and Romans held the customs of the Etruscans in horror. Their attitude toward women was the object of much bitter criticism. The unusually high position held by Tyrrhenian women in society and as companions, the "femininity" of their civilization, was a source of disproportional irritation particularly to the Romans. It can be said without exaggeration that the descendants of Aeneas made of the Etruscans something in the

order of a negative model; a black background against which their own sober virtues were supposed to shine.

An ancient and reliable way of insulting your neighbor is to question the virtue of his wife or daughter. A hefty anthology of Greek and Roman texts could be assembled on the subject of (what the authors consider) the dreadful conduct of Tyrrhenian women. Herodotus writes that in Lydia (the speculative homeland of the Etruscans) all girls prostituted themselves to earn the money for a dowry. Probably following this example, Plautus does not fail to reprove the promiscuous Tyrrhenian girls:

...non enim hic, ubi ex Tusco more[7]

Tute tibi indigne dotem quaeras corpore.

Theopompus, a Greek historian of the fourth century B.C., portrays Etruscan life as a perpetual, shameless orgy.

On the murals in Etruscan tombs representing feasts, games, and festivities, there are always women beside the men. It is probably only in the Creto-Mycenean civilization that they will achieve such a high level of freedom and independence. The connection between these two remote cultures presses itself on the imagination with special force. Even such an exact mind as Ventris[8] felt it: in his youthful work he attempted to determine to what degree Etruscan writing is reminiscent of Linear B, despite what was after all a small likelihood of historical links. The high social position of women, exceptional in antiquity, is underlined by the fact that the mother's name, not the father's, was added to a male name.

However matters stood with their morality, it is certain that in the sphere of the art of living the Etruscans were masters. They had a winning childlike levity, a cult of fun, an inclination to refined elegance and luxury. The Renaissance courts of Tuscany are like a distant echo of that civilization.

The house, which initially had one room and later many rooms surrounding an atrium, constituted the framework for an

existence full of intimacy and charm.

"They had the custom of sitting down twice a day to a feast among ornamental carpets of flowers and a variety of silver dishes. They were waited on at table by a large number of domestic servants, chosen from the most grateful and dressed in more or less costly apparel, depending on the kind of reception it was. Everything—rooms and hosts—was splendid…

"Now they have lost their former strength and the military glory of their ancestors; they spend their life amid feasts and frivolous effeminate amusements, and this decline may have its origin in the wealth of the country."

Their gastronomy had to be excellent. A mural in the tomb of Golini in Orvieto is suffused with an appetizing smell of the kitchen. With striking realism a whole complex gourmet laboratory is represented, with wise kitchen utensils, slabs of meat, and game hung from hooks.

The feasts were accompanied by music and dancing. If a sound recording of Etruscan life had been preserved, its dominant accent would be the modulating, ever-present voice of the flute. "To the sound of the flute the Tyrrhenians entered into fist fights, kneaded bread dough, and flogged slaves." An astonishing remark by an ancient observer. An Etruscan legend tells of a rather Orphic method of hunting as well. A flutist hidden in a bush lured wild animals into a net with the sound of his instrument.

From music and dance it is but a short step to the theater. Its genesis, according to a Roman author, was to have been as follows: young people offering prayers to the gods performed a variety of gestures, awkward at first, later expressing the content of their appeal to the heavens. Etruscan dancers, mimes, and actors quickly made their way to Rome and there became uncommonly popular (the word *histrion* is of Etruscan origin). Another source of drama were the songs of farmers offering sacrifices to their protectors. The most famous site for this kind of celebration was the town of Fescennium. Horace mentions these folk songs, full of peasant verve and humor; he emphasizes their proverbial freedom of expression and coarse

sarcasm. From the whole of the Etruscans' dramatic literature nothing survived, unless you count the stray name of an author of Tuscan tragedies, Volnius, stripped of his works.

However, life in Etruria was not a party without end. It was a country of art and gloomy religion, but also with a conception of life very different from the Roman. Their alloy of mortal fear and refined worldliness seems paradoxical.

We have said that the Etruscans appeared in Italy in the eighth century B.C. This sounds as if we were talking about some ghost in a Romantic ballad. The problem of origins was of passionate interest to the ancients. Herodotus traces the Etruscans back to Lydia, on the coast of Asia Minor.

"During the reign of King Atys[9], son of Manes, all of Lydia was visited by a great hunger. For a certain time the Lydians bore it patiently, and later, when it did not cease, they looked for means of prevention, one or another of them coming up with something new each time. And so it was that the game of dice was invented, knucklebones, soccer, and all other games with the exception of checkers; that is one invention the Lydians do not claim for themselves. When they had found a new game they faced hunger as follows: for a whole day they played without interruption, so they didn't feel hunger, and the next day, having stopped playing, they ate. And so they lived for eighteen years. When the evil did not cease but grew more and more severe, the king divided all Lydians into two parts and ordered one part to draw straws—either to stay at home or to emigrate. He appointed himself to be king of the part that fate had told to stay, and his son, whose name was Tyrrhenus, to be king of the émigrés. And so after the lots had been drawn some of them left the country, headed for Smyrna, and built ships for themselves. They loaded all the portable possessions they needed and sailed off to search for a means to live and a piece of land. In the end, having passed by many peoples, they arrived in Umbria, where they founded a city and live to this day. Instead of Lydians they now called themselves Tyrrhenians, after the king's son who had led them here."

Other historians point to the islands of the Aegean Sea as the cradle of the Etruscans. According to Dionysus of

Helicarnassus, they are native Greeks. The Greeks called them Tyrsenoi, Tyrrhenoi. The Romans called them Tusci, Etrusci; they called themselves Rasenna, Rasna. Contemporary scholars lean toward the theory that holds the Etruscans came from the east. In one of his works Massimo Pallottino, the dean of Etruscologists, says not without irritation that it is enough for a scholar of an ancient civilization to appear in a salon for him to be bombarded with questions on nothing but the origins of the Tyrrhenians. No one bugs scholars with questions about the origins of the Greeks or Romans, as if those problems had been solved to universal satisfaction and were not, as is the case, just as complicated and mysterious as the genesis of the Etrucans.

The learned man is right to be irritated, but what to do with a very human curiosity and a need to find origins? Those whose origins we don't know don't fully exist for us. Ancient historians understood this need. Their works are full of mostly imaginary genealogies. We see the collective through the prism of an individual and a family with a pure genealogical line, derived from a protoplast hero. Herodotus, speaking of Leonidas, traces his ancestors all the way back to Hercules, lending the historical figure the support of a mythical forefather.

For the Greeks, the Etruscans were a disturbing enigma. Not only because they constituted the first serious obstacle to colonial conquests, but also because they did not at all fit into the category of barbarians. They had a culture and a political organization very close to the Greek, in many respects equal to it, and in addition they spoke a language reminiscent of the dialect of the inhabitants of Lemnos before the island had been conquered by the Athenians; testimony to this is a tomb headstone carrying an inscription in a language related to Etruscan.

How to get out of the vicious circle of guesses and hypotheses, the same ones in which the ancients were caught up? Franz Altheim and Massimo Pallotino propose to replace the question about the Etruscans' origins with a more sensible question, namely how this people formed itself on the Appenine Peninsula. Whether they were native or came from

the east, their civilization was born and developed in Italy, and was certainly the product of many factors, an ethnic mix, not a pure tribe. For when we speak of the French (or of any large nation), we know that peoples as diverse as the Celts, Ligurians, Romans, and Franks went to make up that people—to mention only the first on the list. One more stone through the window of the ethnic cleanliness freaks.

The mystery of the Etruscan language has attracted scholarly minds for the last three centuries. The deciphering of an unknown script is usually a matter of searching for phonetic equivalents and the meaning of signs. That's how it was with hieroglyphics or cuneiform. The case of the Etruscan language is radically different and even paradoxical. We can quite easily read Etruscan texts, but we don't understand them, or more precisely—we don't understand very much of them. In other words, the Etruscan alphabetical system (despite the changes it underwent over a period of centuries) is known to us. We know that the Tyrrhenian alphabet was probably derived from the Greek and that particular signs represent syllables as they do in Greek. On the other hand, the phonetics of the language is decidedly different from the Greek (for example, there is no vowel "o," which in the Etruscans' language is replaced by "u").

The linguistic material of an unknown script we are trying to decipher must be of sufficient quantity and, most importantly, variety. The number of Etruscan texts transmitted is sizable, running to 10,000, but apart from three valuable finds (of which the largest, preserved in Zagreb, counts 1500 words) they are short and desperately monotonous. Almost all of them are grave inscriptions along the lines of: "Vel Partunus son of Velthur and Ramta Satinei died in the 28th year of life." Instead of the epic poems and sacred books whose existence we have every right to assume, this rich civilization hands down to us a hopelessly dull collection of obituaries.

However, the thankless material has not discouraged scholars. Until a happy discovery drops a dreamt-of bilingual text in their laps, they will try to decipher Etruscan without that additional help. Some use a deductive method, putting one of the known ancient languages supposed to be related to

Etruscan under the Etruscan text. The list of such experiments is long. Patient linguists have tried to elucidate the obscure texts by means of Hebrew, Greek, Egyptian, Assyrian, Hittite, and Italian dialects. But the Tyrrhenian language proved to be exceptionally resistant to these attempts. Others use an inductive method: they abandon the aid of other languages and work as if from within the language they are studying. Equipped with the by now considerable knowledge of the Etruscan religion and civilization, they look for repetitions, similar terms which may refer to the practice of religious rituals, titles in the social hierarchy or otherwise known facts. Both methods, demanding great care and subtlety, have so far led to very modest results.

The French Etruscologist Raymond Bloch tells the story of how, during archaeological works in Tuscany, the owner of the terrain under investigation confided in him that he had found a column covered with writing. Part of the column was covered with signs from the Latin alphabet, the other part with signs completely incomprehensible to the peasant. Not knowing what to do with the enormous stone, he had simply buried it.

"You can easily imagine what I felt[10]. Was this not the hotly desired bilingual Latin-Etruscan text? I requested and received of my informant his immediate permission to search his property. Alas! The dig yielded nothing, in any case not what I expected. We dug up a heap of stone that had certainly belonged to several buildings of the Roman age, but none of the blocks we retrieved carried the slightest trace of any inscription. I widened the area of the search, but in vain. Disappointed and excited at the same time, I wanted to explain the source of this mystery…My informant, a peasant, had probably gone over his land in the hope of finding Etruscan objects, because the whole area boasted a wealth of Tuscan gravesites containing valuable material. And so, as so often, these investigations were carried out at night, to avoid any indiscretion and hide from the sight of curious passers-by and neighbors…At night the treasure hunter's imagination grows more fervid and bold…Perhaps word had got around of my desire to find a Latin-Etruscan inscription and the imagination produced the object of my desire. It is not impossible. Another

explanation also seems plausible: the inscription was indeed found but our treasure hunter, instead of burying it as he said he did, may have destroyed it, breaking it up with a hammer and using it as building material, as often happens in various countries. But he would never admit to this sacrilege." This excerpt is a good illustration of archaeology's passionate game with chance.

Research so far has been mostly carried out in graveyards, not cities. It is more than probable that Etruscan-Roman documents existed, announcements and decrees concerning administrative or other public affairs. The hope of finding such a document precisely in the little explored cities is all the greater for the fact that the victors did not suppress the customs and language of the defeated, and the Etruscan Roman age lasted until the third century A.D. The digs conducted in the Campagna, on terrain which absorbed Etruscan and Greek influences, as well as in Asia Minor, may well bring a solution to the riddle. Despite their many failures, researchers won't capitulate. The beautiful battle pitting intelligence against mystery continues.

The poverty of written traces is compensated to a great degree by rich material in the sphere of art, which allows us to reconstruct the political and private lives of the Etruscans. It is not the first time that art replaces writing, becomes a sign and a testimony of an enduring presence. Instead of a text's monotonous mumbling we are given this civilization to look over. It is a magnificent opportunity, not only for scholars but also for amateurs. The latter, as D. H. Lawrence writes, look not for objective truth but for contact. "The Etruscans are neither a theory nor a thesis[11]. If anything they are an experience."

For a long time I was blind to Etruscan art. In museums I spurned Etruscan bronzes as if they were second-rate Greek works; their tombstone reliefs seemed to me Roman copies. I went through the history of disgust and delight with the Etruscans in an abbreviated form.

Until the end of the nineteenth century their art was considered an uninteresting copy of Greek art. At the heart of

this judgment lay the positivist and by now defeated theory of the "progress" of art. The naturalistic Greek sculpture of the Hellenic period was supposed to be the crowning achievement of antiquity. Bad academic taste, combined with a theory grafted from the social sciences, annihilated the Etruscans. Jules Martha, in his book *Etruscan Art*, published in 1889, could blithely declare that it can be reduced to more or less clumsy imitations.

But from the beginning of the twentieth century, perspectives and sensibilities radically changed. The revolutionary programs and manifestos of modern art contributed to this not a little. The attention of historians, critics, and the public turned to periods and schools which up till then had been scornfully described as primitive, decadent, barbarian in relation to the classical ideal. In the polemic with that ideal, Etruscan art became one of the most important arguments.

Those polemics and attempts to reevaluate have not, however, explained the main problem, one of the most complex in art history: that of the artistic autonomy and originality of the Etruscan visual arts. It's true that people speak of such distinguishing features of the Tyrrhenians' work as intensity of expression, achieved by the accenting of detail to the detriment of the harmony of the whole, which it seems was little valued; a sense of movement, a fondness for painterly sketches, a free and open structure, and also a tendency toward abstract forms. It is all eloquently put, but contact with Etruscan art was for me an unending see-saw of delight and disappointment, it disarmed my critical sense and my analytical faculties. An adventure worth recommending to the impatient as well as to lovers of classification.

For many people, contact with a work of art means confirming an accepted model of beauty. For those people, Etruscan art will remain inevitably and hermetically sealed. To feel it fully, one must cultivate an ability to react spontaneously, directly, a joyful curiosity for things unlike any we are accustomed to accepting. The lesson of the Etruscans is a lesson in freeing oneself of aesthetic prejudices in the

interest of something hard to define, a disinterested play of the eye on an object.

In the time I was getting to know new Etruscan necropolises, new bronzes, new sculptures, I was attended by a sense of growing chaos. It is difficult to get hold of any clear line of development in this art, or a meaningful, explanatory division into schools and periods. Certainly, masterpieces without which the museum of our imagination would be poorer—the Apollo of Veii, the conjugal sarcophagus in Caere—are mixed up with objects of art whose rote character and artistic mediocrity offend and repel us. In virtually every Etruscan work three ages are contained: the heritage of a very remote antiquity, a contemporary influence of Greek art, and the anticipation of Roman art. In the artistic sphere, as in life, the Etruscans seem to be in a constant chase after an elusive formula and crystallization.

A melancholy promenade: Cerveteri, Tarquinia, Volterra, Veii; hills of stone tombs completely overgrown with grass. In the kingdom of pines, crickets, and cypresses, not far under the earth, feasts, hunts, and dance are immortalized on walls. The tomb carvings engrave themselves deepest in memory. A man leaning on an elbow, head held high, draped in a garment revealing his torso, as if eternity were a long, hot summer night.

A LATIN LESSON

> And so if you, Francesco, like all creatures, are governed by a desire for happiness, repeat: rana[1], ranae, ranae, ranam, rana, rana. Come to know the complexity of temporal phrases: ubi, ut, ubi primum, ut primum, simul, simulac, simulaque, dum, donec, quod, antequam, priusquam, cum…And above all get to know the structure of conditional phrases, so that there will be no room in them for fraudulence, blackmail, lies.
>
> BOLESŁAW MICIŃSKI, *REPLY TO A LETTER FROM FRANCESCO, A CITIZEN OF ROME*

THE *GYMNASIUM* STOOD on a hill. It was a white three-story building with large windows and a red slanting roof. If it stood out in any way it was by virtue of its stern simplicity. A façade without ornament except at the summit, where there was a bas-relief of an eagle. Under the bas-relief there was a space, as if for an inscription. Most appropriate would have been a Latin maxim along the lines of: *Felix qui potuit*[2] *rerum cognoscere causas*, or if anyone asked for our opinion—no one did—Juvenal's directive to the educators of youth: *Maxima debetur puero*[3] *reverentia*.

One entered through a heavy gate. Steps, and at the top of the steps a massive statue of our school's patron. The plaster-pale king had his left foot set forward, and this seemingly insignificant detail became the material cause of a student custom not in keeping with the gravity of an educational institution. The left shoe of our solemn white-clad patron was disturbingly black and polished by frequent touches that were

supposed to protect us from evil charms, failing grades we called *baniaks*, and from the terrible wrath of our preceptors. Severe interdictions were of no avail, we devoted ourselves to these magical practices with an ignorant peasant stubbornness. In the school a cult of reason reigned, but as we know, nothing encourages the growth of occultism more than official rationalism.

From the first my fearful novitiate's sensitivity registered most strongly not images but olfactory impressions. The cloakroom was down in the vast basement. It was like the kitchen of school odors: dust, leather, damp clothes, and fear. From there one went down a long corridor with a stone floor, and thus over odorous stone, all the way to the classroom with its smell of varnish, chalk, with its damp blackboard.

Right on the first day our attention was drawn by a group of pupils who seemed to stand slightly aloof. They were truly different. Their blue school uniforms were not new like ours, didn't hang too pitifully big on them, without any intimacy with their bodies. In comparison with them we were like dolls from a clothing store window. We were especially envious of their linen pants whose seats were shiny like mirrors, an attribute of perverse *gymnasium* stylishness. They moved freely and looked down on us. Life's slings and arrows had lent their faces a bitter sublimity.

They were repeating a grade. It would appear that they had taken too literally the principle "*Repetitio est mater studiorum*[4]." The bitterness of their defeat was probably mitigated by the fact that among us greenhorns they enjoyed the authority of veterans. It was they who initiated us into the complex world of school, bristling with danger. Because each of our professors was an individual, if not an original, you had to get to know your opponent as well as you possibly could. Fate endowed us with a charming class guardian, a gray-haired Polish studies teacher whose sweet nature led us to call him Rosie. The math teacher and the Latin teacher, on the other hand, put the fear of God into us.

I don't know why we nicknamed the latter "Grzesio" even though he was the total contradiction of the goodnatured

country bumpkin the name suggested. I think there was something in this of the beautiful human striving to assimilate baffling and terrifying phenomena. It is probably for the same reason that cyclones bear sonorous women's names.

I well remember the day he first came, or rather, strode into our classroom. We stood up in front of our desks and he sauntered down the aisles, studying us closely, inspecting us like a commander inspecting his division before a parade. This took a long time. Then he told us to sit down and gave us a syllabus with required and suggested readings. He said he would not urge us to study but would only rely on our reasonableness and sense of responsibility; after all, Roman youths at our age put on a man's toga and prepared to govern the greatest empire in the world.

Then—without any logical connection, or so it seemed to us—he began to draw a map of the Roman Forum on the blackboard, starting from the Arch of Septimus Severus and extending to Constantine's Basilica. Mysterious names were dropped: Curia, Lapis Niger, Rostra, Basilica Iulia, Via Sacra, the spring of Juturna, the Porch of Pearls. We obediently copied down the Forum map in our notebooks, not understanding what it was all about. Explanations would come later. For the time being the professor contented himself with the remark: "Some day you may arrive in Rome in a proconsul's retinue. So you should familiarize yourselves with the Eternal City's main buildings. I don't want you to wander around the imperial capital like rude barbarians."

I arrived in Rome twenty years later, not in a retinue but alone. The territories where I was born then no longer belonged to the Roman Empire. To be correct, they never had, in the political sense. If they belonged it was in another sense entirely.

I directed my first steps to the Forum. It was night, so the Forum was closed. From the Capitol I looked out at the arches, the remains of porches, the stones eaten away by time. It was a ghostly sight. In the cold light of reflectors this center of the ancient world was a vast, venerable rubbish heap, the rock bottom, the eschatology of a civilization, the ultimate form of

all pride and power. It was cut off from the night like a photograph and therefore unreal; a lava of asphalt ran around it on which shiny vehicles raced by amid noise and commotion. There was no doubt who would win this duel.

The next day I went to visit the Forum methodically, in the full light of day. The fact that I did not feel lost amid the stones I owe entirely to my Latin professor. I remember him with gratitude. But at the same time I was haunted by the thought that I should not seek Rome *in* Rome, that it is not there that this civilization's grandeur would speak to me.

Let me not be suspected of fishing for paradoxes if I say I was overcome by a sense of that greatness a few years later in the city of Newcastle, on the way to Scotland. I was then in England for a purpose remote from studying Roman remains. By that time I knew the south of France—*Gallia Narbonensis*[5]—fairly well, but the Pont du Gard, the Maison Carrée, the Arles arena, and the theater in Orange, no matter how fine these sites were, did not make the same impression on me and did not run my thoughts onto new tracks like what I encountered on the border of Britain and Scotland. Provence—like Spain and Dalmatia—belonged to Rome in a natural sort of way because of the sky and natural environment they shared, so my mind added those conquered provinces to the empire without wonder or resistance. But there, under low-hanging clouds from which a piercingly cold rain fell, the Romans' message was an extraordinary thing, bordering on bold folly.

In Newcastle, the place where I was seized by the spirit of Rome, there were no marble temples or triumphal arches, nothing, literally nothing that might prompt any kind of aesthetic *frisson*. But there was a well-preserved earthen wall stretching in a virtually straight line across the hilly countryside from the mouth of the river Tyne in the east to the Firth of Solway in the west, cutting across the whole island—the northernmost trench of a civilization struggling to defend itself against unconquered barbarian tribes.

How did the conquest of Britain come about? The island lay far off, beyond the Mediterranean Sea basin and as it might

seem, beyond the sphere of the empire's vital interests. Reports on its shape, resources, and population were vague, derived from sailors and merchants and full of fantastical data. Best known was probably the account of Pytheas, a Greek traveler from the town of Massilia[6] in Gaul who lived at the time of Alexander the Great. For the average Roman, Britain lay on the boundary line, if not beyond the boundaries of geographical reality, near the island of Thule, then on the edge of the known world.

Roman forces first set foot on the island under the command of Julius Caesar at the end of August in 55 B.C. That bold military expedition happened suddenly, was inadequately prepared, and almost ended in defeat for the invading army, which consisted of two legions. The islanders were waiting for the invaders and from the moment they went ashore they suffered significant losses. Julius Caesar did not fight any decisive battle with the Britons and his forces made only slight inroads on the inhospitable country. Difficulties with provisions, worsening weather, and above all parts of the fleet destroyed by tidal waves forced the commander to accept a truce offered by the Britons and a withdrawal to Gaul. It was not exactly a defeat, but it was a dubious and dearly bought partial success.

The second campaign a year later was planned on a far broader scale than the first. Five legions and two thousand cavalry soldiers took part in it. The enormous fleet, which counted 800 ships, so frightened the Britons that they did not put up resistance to the invaders until they had reached what is now Canterbury. But Caesar again made a fatal mistake, underestimating the sea's laws, and part of his fleet was consumed by the element. If the Britons had managed to destroy the Roman fleet, the legions would have been left to the natives' mercy or lack of it.

Caesar's greatest ally was his opponents' lack of a political sense. He probably counted as much on that as on the courage of his soldiers.

Like the inhabitants of Gaul, their Celtic brothers on the island were unable to organize themselves under one

leadership to defy the invading army. Nor did they have any rational strategic plan. And yet they outnumbered the invaders, were quite well armed, and the woodlands and bogs were their natural allies. To be victorious they had to avoid a frontal assault and use the tactics—so inconvenient to legions—of small-scale or partisan warfare, i.e. attack transports and divisions astray in the wilderness. If the war had taken such a turn and had gone on for more than a year, the Romans would have been obliged to retreat, and with significant losses.

Advising the commanders of lost campaigns two thousand years after the fact on what they should have done—the favorite entertainment of writers of history—makes little sense, especially as in this case the islanders did their utmost to resist the invaders. At first the majority of peoples in the southeast of Britain united under the command of King Cassivellaunus and employed the best tactics of partisan warfare, harrassing the legions while they made their slow and difficult way into unknown country. But before long a conflict developed within the camp of Caesar's opponents and the kings of particular tribes began to make pacts with the Roman leader. Because unsettling reports of rebellion were coming from Gaul, Caesar seized the first opportunity to make peace with Cassivellaunus. A peace advantageous to the Romans, because they walked away from a campaign that might have ended in defeat as victors, taking loot, prisoners of war, and imposing taxes on the peoples they had conquered.

Many historians have been vexed by the question why Caesar embarked on this risky venture. It was probably not only due to a passionate desire for pearls, as Suetonius suggests. The French historian Albert Grenier calls the invasion of Britain an extravagant and lunatic undertaking; Jerome Carcopino calls it a prestigious operation without a future, Camille Julien sees in it a manifestation of the gluttony typical of Caesar, "who wanted to conquer more than he could keep."

It seems, however, that the intentions of the future dictator were more prosaic and coldly calculating: he simply wished to enrich himself and his legions and also to secure conquered Gaul from an attack from the west, for theoretically it was

possible that one day the Britons would come to the aid of their Celtic brothers on the continent; finally, and particularly importantly, the British expedition to some extent set the score even with Caesar's rival for power, Pompey, and his military successes in the east. And indeed, the supremacy of Roman arms on the legendary island excited an uncommon enthusiasm in Rome.

However, it would be hard to say that Britain—even part of it—was incorporated in the empire. A systematic conquest was begun almost a hundred years after Caesar's military excursion. The Romans at that time had a much greater chance of bringing the foggy island washed by a cold sea under their yoke. Above all, they had quite detailed information, a decent knowledge of the enemy and his country. Britain had been penetrated by Roman merchants, who provided valuable data on both geography and social relations. A handful of political émigrés had appeared in the capital of the world, such as the unfortunate Cunobelinus, exiled and thrust from power by his son and seeking justice at the imperial court. The Britons committed a fatal error; they insulted the Romans by demanding the release of fugitives, and they also provoked skirmishes on the coast of Gaul. Of this Suetonius writes laconically: "*tumultuantes Britannos ob non redditos transfugas*[7]." War was inevitable.

In 43 A.D., during the rule of emperor Claudius, successor to Nero, a Roman army made up of four legions sets off to conquer Britain. Three quarters of the mobilized forces are soldiers stationed on the Rhine in Germany. They were the legions II Augusta of Argentoratum (now Strasbourg), XX Valeria Victrix of Novaesium (now Neuss), and XIV Gemina, stationed on the lower Rhine. To this formation was added the IX Hispana of Pannonia (now Austria). If we count on top of that the supporting forces (*auxilia*) and those from Gaul and Thrace, it was quite a hefty army for that time, counting about forty thousand.

At the head of the expedition stands the consulary legate Aulus Plautius, who was to become the first governor of Britain. The forces land at three different points and the army moves westward. The British forces are led by Caratacus and

Togodumnus. The latter soon dies and for long years Caratacus, ruler of a kingdom on the middle and lower Thames, will be the head of the anti-Roman resistance.

The islanders' strategy is based on the use of natural lines of defense and on thwarting the Romans in their attempted river-crossings. It comes to a hard, two-day battle on the river Medway. The Romans win, but their enemy is by no means undone. "For ten long years Caratacus was a thorn in the side of the Roman army and achieved many successes, some big, some small, but history recalls his struggles to speak only of one great battle on a terrain he chose himself, where he risked all and lost all in a final shattering defeat," writes the British historian Ian A. Richmond.

After crossing the Thames the legions stop to wait for the arrival of the emperor, for the divine Claudius "desired the glory of a real triumph[8]." He arrived after a delay caused by meteorological vilenesses. For many historians the emperor's participation was from a military point of view of no significance to the campaign as a whole. Something completely different was at stake, namely considerations of prestige. "Rome wanted to see its ruler wearing the victor's wreath." And at the head of his legions, Claudius enters Camulodunum (Colchester), the capital of the banished king Cunobelinus, afterward making haste back to Rome, where "he made a triumphant entry amid the most magnificent pomp."

But this is only the propagandistic window-dressing of a long, bloody, and muddled expedition. Muddled because the whole history of the conquest is like a fresco worn away in many places. It was a peripheral affair, and its history has to be reconstrued from the scattered fragments contained in the writings of the empire's historians. These were not the records of eyewitnesses, but information acquired "second-hand," often very brief and sketchy. For that reason it is difficult now to reconstruct the events, give an overview of the specific campaigns, movements of troops, locate the main battles and skirmishes; at times it is even tricky to name the peoples with whom the Romans were doing battle. For example, a biographer of the later emperor Vespasian, then the

commander of the II legion, says only that Vespasian defeated two powerful tribes and conquered more than twenty fortresses. That's all.

However, we are not completely helpless. The earth faithfully preserved eloquent traces of the battles. We have no particulars about the conquest of the fortress at Dunum (now Maiden Castle), but archaeologists discovered dramatic remains there, from which the fate of the fort's defenders may be deciphered. In the area of defense ramparts a military cemetery was uncovered, probably founded hurriedly at the time of a siege. In the skulls of skeletons pieces of Roman swords were found, and in the backbone of one of the defenders, a bullet probably thrown by a *euthytonos*[9], a Roman war machine.

One should not imagine, though, that the conquest of Britain was simply a matter of the movement of a powerful military steamroller trampling and laying everything to waste. What force could not accomplish was tackled by politics; local leaders and tribal kings entered into negotiations with the invader. This happened mainly because the Romans were not at all concerned to destroy the country's social structure and the hierarchy of power they found there, although there was the necessary curtailment of sovereignty, of course: an oath of fidelity to the emperor and a pledge of loyalty to Rome.

Some declared themselves sincerely and apparently out of conviction, like Cogidubnus, the ruler of the kingdom of Verica (in Sussex). He was one of the first who agreed to collaborate with the invaders, and so he was permitted to rule his people and even granted the exceptional title of *rex et legatus Augusti in Britannia*, "in accordance with the old custom, long since adopted by the Roman people, of retaining kings as instruments of slavery[10]," as Tacitus soberly comments. Other tribal heads on the other hand played the role of Wallenrod, signed peace treaties, declared their submission to the will of the conquerors, but waited for the right moment to transform themselves, like king Prasutagus of the Iceni, from allies into rebels.

The Roman legions' main lines of attack ran westward and northward. We know this, or can figure it out from the placement of the main garrisons toward the end of the forties: Legion II is stationed in the southwest, probably at Exeter (Isca), XX in Gloucester (Glevum), and XIV farthest northwest at Wroxeter (Viroconium). The reach of the Roman conquerors at that time on the northeastern front is not clear.

The worst battles take place in Wales, where the Roman forces are led by the governor of Britain, Ostorius Scapula. The mountainous and forested terrain in that part of the island creates ideal conditions for defense and Caratacus, the indefatigable foe of the Romans, understood this perfectly. However, he committed a fatal error in deciding to fight a conclusive battle, in which he suffered a defeat and saved himself by fleeing to the court of the Queen of the Brigantes, Cartimandua. The queen of the mightiest of island tribes, more prudent than patriotic, delivers the fettered commander into the hands of the Romans in 51 A.D. In the same year Ostorius, "plagued by an surfeit of cares, parted with life, to the delight of his enemies."

As in Gaul, anti-Roman resistance was inspired by the druids. One of their most important centers was the island of Mona (Anglesey) just off the coast of Wales. In 1944 an enormous military storehouse was found there, arms above all, military equipment and also—oddly—chains that had been used to fetter slaves. Archaeologists think these were votive articles, not as it might appear, an arsenal. The derivation of the objects from the various remote corners of the world of northern Celts, from Ireland to Yorkshire, is eloquent proof of the extent of the influence of the druids of Mona. All those for whom the occupation was intolerable found shelter on the island—political refugees, fugitive prisoners of war, expropriated princes—and it is more than probable that plans for anti-Roman revolts were drawn up there.

Suetonius Paulinus, the great commander and suppressor of the wild tribes of the Atlas Mountains, decided to conquer this cultural and political center in the very first year as administrator of Britain. The expedition took place in 59. It was a clash of two worlds, as Tacitus describes in his

incomparable fashion. “The enemy’s battle array stood along the coast—inpenetrable rows of arms and men, among whom ran maidens like Furies clad in mourning gowns, with their hair loose; they carried banners before them, and around them druids prayed with their arms raised up toward the heavens and flung curses; the uncommon sight so terrified the soldiers that they stood with petrified limbs exposing their bodies to injury.” The Romans had a cruel slaughter in store for the islanders. Even trees were not spared, “groves devoted to cruel superstitions were cut down: for [the druids] thought it proper to sacrifice the blood of prisoners of war on their altars and consult the gods by reading their innards.”

While the bulk of the Roman army is engaged in battle on the western side of the island, a rebellion breaks out on its other, eastern edge, which could have ended in a rout of the Romans as grave as the defeat of Varus in the Teutoburg Forest. These events, which went down in history as the Boudican Revolt, demand a somewhat broader treatment. It seems necessary to present the background against which the events unfolded, because it offers a clear and accurate characterization of the relations between occupying forces and the conquered.

In the winter of 59 to 60, Prasutagus, king of the Iceni, a tribe inhabiting southeastern Britain (the environs of Camboritum, now Cambridge), dies. Because he did not have a male heir, he willed half of his lands to his two daughters and half to the emperor. It was a cautious and politically prudent will, or so it seems. There were, however, two serious reasons the will was invalid in the eyes of both the Iceni and the Romans. Firstly, according to local laws, the legal heir to the throne should be the king’s widow—Boudica, who had been completely ignored in the succession. Secondly, the Romans did not recognize any women on the throne, with a few exceptions, and even loyal Cartimandua, who handed over Caratacus, was not entitled to be called queen. The annexers’ aim was clear: they wanted the client king’s inheritance after his death to become Roman land—officers, veterans, and the imperial treasury were impatiently awaiting it.

The Romans treat the land of the Iceni as their own property. They move into the houses and estates of its inhabitants; even the king's kin are deprived of their material inheritance, and on top of everything they suffer insults and humiliations: "Boudica was flogged and her daughters prostituted and shamed." The desperate Iceni seize their arms and even persuade their neighbors the Trinovantes to revolt. If the Brigantes had joined them the fate of the Roman legions on the island would have been sealed.

The initiative is in the hands of the rebels, because the Roman forces on the rebellious territories are few and their leadership taken completely by surprise and volatile. The rebels turn against the old capital of the province, Camulodunum (Colchester), nearby which are situated many estates of veterans hated by the locals. The city itself has no fortifications and can easily be pillaged by the rebels. We owe to Tacitus a gloomy overture to these events: "Without any obvious cause the statue of Victoria in Camulodunum was toppled and that backwards, as if it had ceded to the enemy. Women overcome by a prophetic frenzy predicted a devastation, and it is said alien cries were heard in the local *curia*, the theater resounded with howls and an image of a colony overrun was seen in the Thames lagoon; moreover, the Ocean's bloody appearance and the apparitions of human corpses left at ebb tide were explained by the Britons as an earnest of hope, and by veterans as a cause for fear."

The foretellings were fulfilled. In the course of two days Camulodunum was conquered and its Roman and philo-Roman inhabitants killed off without mercy. Inebriated by success, the Britons moved against the IX legion led by the legate Petilius Cerialis, inflicting grave losses on him.

The fate of the Roman army in Britain now lies in the hand of one man: Suetonius Paulinus. He quickly travels from Wales to London, realizing at once that the situation is critical. He then acts with determination and in cold blood. Above all he abandons all plans to defend the cities, surrendering both London and Verulamium (St. Albans) to the mercy of the rebels, who have a bloody massacre in store for the cities' inhabitants. "It is an established fact that around seventy

thousand citizens and allies perished in the aforenamed places. For they did not bother themselves with taking prisoners, selling them or engaging in any other form of war trade, but hastened to slaughter, hang, burn and crucify…"

Suetonius has one aim before him which he pursues with Roman consistency: to concentrate the scattered troops under his command and ensure himself maximum freedom of maneuver.

It is by no means easy. Legion II does not turn up at the muster. Suetonius has under his command legion XIV, some troops from legion XX and auxiliary divisions, together around ten thousand in arms.

When both forces stand on level ground (the terrain as always carefully chosen by the Romans), the enemy forces are eight times greater "and in such an insolent mood that they even brought their wives with them to witness their victory, carrying them on their wagons." But the Britons were badly armed, not very able to carry out any strategic plan, and their scouts' valor was ineffectual against a disciplined army that resembled a many-armed giant, systematically dealing out pitiless blows. The defeat was total: the Britons' wagons blocked their return and the battle turned into a bloodbath. Boudica managed to get away but before long she died, having —some sources say—taken poison. The revolt was suppressed and the legions vented their fury in plunder and murder.

The soldiers' lawlessness did not last long, however, not because the wolves suddenly turned into lambs, but because there was the institution of public prosecutor or fiscal administrator of the province, who could send reports to the emperor independently of the military authorities and influence the policy toward the conquered in a crucial way. And so it happened that the new prosecutor of Britain was a man born in northern Gaul, the husband of a Gallic aristocrat's daughter to boot, which predisposed him to be an advocate of the oppressed. "Roman history knows few examples so revealing of the interpenetration of Roman and provincial influences, sensitivities, and interests in the new world created in Western Europe," writes a scholar of this period.

The next governors—Petilius Cerialis, Julius Frontinus, and Julius Agricola—do adopt a gentler policy. But this does not at all mean that the island was pacified and knew blessed peace under the administration of the new rulers. In Britain the fires of irredentism smolder. As the year 69 ends the Romans are dealt a blow from the side least expected, the Brigantes, hitherto allies, a powerful tribe occupying an expansive territory corresponding to the present counties of Yorkshire, Lancashire, Westmoreland, Cumberland, and the environs of Durham.

As was mentioned earlier, the Brigantes were then under the rule of Queen Cartimandua, so loyal to the Romans, to whom she had handed over Caratacus. She was an imperious and ambitious woman. She might be a patroness of women's liberation, as she left her husband and married some young squire or gallant. Her husband Venetius, exiled and deprived of power, exploits the civil war that had broken out in Rome and the partial withdrawal of troops from the island associated with it to stir up riots, attack the kingdom of the Brigantes and conquer it. Tacitus commenting on these events, writes: "despite the changeable fortunes of battle, our cohorts and cavalry troops saved the queen from peril; the state was left to Venetius and to us, war."

During the reign of emperor Vespasian the Romans undertake a number of successful expeditions against the Brigantes and Silures (inhabitants of southern Wales). Toward the end of the first century the process of the island's consolidation (or rather, that of a considerable part of the island) enters a decisive phase. The northern border is the "hottest." It had for centuries been under pressure from barbarians—the Picts and Scots, never yet brought under the yoke.

Now a figure enters the stage whom one cannot ignore when speaking of the conquest of Britain—Julius Agricola. Born in Provence in 40 A.D., broadly educated, he begins his political career in Britain, where in 61 A.D. he fights under the command of Suetonius Paulinus. Then he occupies a series of responsible state functions, is quaestor in Asia Minor, administrator of Aquitania, consul, and finally at age 38 he is

appointed administrator of Britain, which becomes the peak and simultaneously the not entirely comprehensible end of his brilliant career.

Some historians warn us not to yield to the suggestion of Tacitus, who saw his father-in-law through the magnifying glass of worship. But it is hard not to appreciate Agricola's achievements, both military and political or administrative. Under his leadership the Roman eagles moved furthest northward, to the Firths of Forth and Clyde and even beyond that line. The seven years of Agricola's rule (78–85) mean seven campaigns against the Scots and Picts, crowned by a complete victory at Mons Graupius in 83 A.D. He also built a fleet, raised fortifications and forts, supported city building. Under his administration Roman judicature and territorial self-government spread; taxes were lighter and obligatory military service for native Britons was less onerous.

But Agricola was recalled quite unexpectedly by emperor Domitian and did not fully realize his plans. It seems that the decommissioned administrator, and perhaps he alone, saw matters sharply and clearly. He strove to conquer the whole island, also prepared an expedition to Ireland, aware that the law of conquest dictates that it must be total, and that to let enemy neighbors go unpunished would lead to catastrophe. History proved him right; he himself dragged out the no doubt embittered existence of a premature political emeritus to the end of his days, without any position or title.

Some explain Domitian's decision as due to common human envy, and also to the persecution mania of this tyrant, who was an enemy of philosophy and the Senate, a patron of informers who smelled conspiracy everywhere; also, this very unsympathetic emperor (whose favorite pastime was catching flies, and not only flies, and stabbing them with a chisel) may have drawn conclusions from his not very successful expeditions against the Germans and Dacians and decided to consolidate the empire inside what were then its borders and to abandon conquests.

The ancients compared Britain's shape to an ax. The Romans had a tight hold on the handle, but the northern blade

was soon to turn against them. Agricola's gains and plans were abandoned, and since the warlike tribes that populated Scotland would not be brought under the yoke, it was decided with truly Roman simplicity to fence themselves off from the barbarians—with a wall.

No, it is not a work of any beauty—this wall running from the eastern to the western end of the island, from the mouth of the river Tyne to Solway Firth. The wall cannot be beautiful; it is anti-architecture frozen in a convulsive gesture of defense by space stoned to death. Though it does not prompt an aesthetic response, it elicits admiration for the genius of Roman engineers. Particularly as it has lasted up to today virtually undamaged; only here and there time has made notches in it, through which melancholy cows now wander.

Hadrian's Wall, for it was under his rule that it was raised in the years from 123 to 128 A.D. in a straight line across the island, is 76 Roman miles long, which is to say almost 113 kilometers. Its eastern section, which comes to 45 miles, was first built in stone, but the remaining western part is an earth wall covered with turf. The wall came to 6 meters, its breadth to 3 meters. At intervals of a mile turrets rose up which accommodated men and an observation point as well as two watchtowers. The wall was also fitted out with numerous assault gates. When a barbarian attack concentrated on one point, legion soldiers burst from neighboring gates and closed a ring around the besieging forces like hunters. There was a wide moat in front of the wall and behind it, sixteen fortresses, places where troops—from 10 to 15 thousand—were stationed at all times. This very functionally conceived construction was completed by a fortified road running parallel to the wall, which made it possible to transfer soldiers and equipment quickly.

A hundred and some kilometers north of Hadrian's Wall, the Antonine Wall was raised in 140–142 A.D. (the name derives from emperor Antoninus Pius). Its length is 37 miles and it connects two points on the coast, Forth and Clyde. Forty years after it was finished, this line of defense was abandoned. In comparison with Hadrian's Wall it was significantly feebler in its fortifications, very insecure especially on its flanks, but

also too far north for both defensive lines to reinforce each other in a coordinated defensive action. The Romans knocked it down themselves.

It was not in walls that defense should have been sought at that time. A fatal disease is wearing the empire down from the inside. The empire is shaken by battles for the throne, in which the administrator of Britain Clodius Albinus also takes part, without much good fortune. He does not hesitate to strip the island of legions to enter into a struggle for power with emperor Septimus Severus. Britain's administrator is killed, but the Scottish Celts take advantage of the situation to cross Hadrian's Wall and carry out a bold and devastating raid that brings them as far as York and Chester. In 208–211, emperor Septimus Severus seems to adopt Agricola's farsighted plans, pushes the barbarians behind Hadrian's Wall, and even moves farther north, past Aberdeen. But he, too, failed to realize his intentions. When he was dying in York in 211 he is said to have spoken the words: "At the moment I assumed power of the state, there was chaos everywhere; I have left behind peace even in Britain."

An illusory and short-lasting peace. The buccaneer ships of the Franks and Saxons appear off the eastern coastline—a herald of the impending disaster. They were observed with unease, just as a few centuries later on the coast of France during the rule of Charles the Great, the square sails of the Normans announcing future defeats were watched uneasily.

In the stormy history of Roman Britain there is also a pretender king. He was one Carausius, commander of a fleet, who acquired a considerable fortune in battles with pirates. Having achieved wealth, he longed for glory. In 286 he declared himself emperor of Britain. Diocletian, then ruling in Rome, at first simply endured the insult. But when a few years later Carausius is murdered by his confidant, a punitive expedition lands on the island under the command of Constantius Chlorus, the emperor ruling the western part of the imperium. Chlorus overcame the rebels and also carried out works on a grand scale to rebuild the cities—York, Verulamium—strengthened London's defense system and Hadrian's Wall, and erected new forts, mainly on the eastern

coast. He also led a victorious campaign against the Picts, soon after which he died in York in 306. His armed effort assured the island peace for thirty years.

In Diocletian's time an array of far-reaching administrative reforms were introduced. The empire is divided into twelve dioceses. One of them is Britain, which is made up of four newly delineated provinces. Each of the provinces put up its own militia (*limitanei*[11]) which obeyed a chief commander, the *Comes Britanniarum*. The burden of defending the northern border from then on rested on the shoulders of the leader of Britain (*Dux Britanniarum*), and the eastern coastline was to be defended by the Comes of the Saxon coast (*Comes Litoris Saxonici*). The main idea of these reforms was—it seems—to streamline the leadership and to involve the local population more broadly than before in the island's defense.

But the local population was not sufficiently Romanized, not all linked their fates to the fate of Rome and not all asked themselves the rhetorical question *Quid salvum*[12] *sit, si Roma perit?* To make things worse, the ethnic composition of the British diocese was changing to the Romans' disadvantage under the influence of great migratory movements. For in the first half of the fourth century, Celts from Scotland and Ireland settled in the territory occupied and ultimately pacified by the Romans, mainly in the western parts of the island. At first it is a peaceable migration. New arrivals receive the emperor's permission to settle on the conditions laid down by the allies. Temporarily, however, for already in 367 they join with the Picts, Scots, Franks, and Saxons who launch a concentric attack on the island from the north, west, and southeast. The Comes of the Saxon Coast perishes in the battle and Britain's commander takes flight. Waves of barbarians overwhelm virtually the whole island.

The situation is turned around by Comes Theodosius, sent out by emperor Valentinian at the head of a mighty army. He restores order, rebuilds the destroyed wall of Hadrian and a number of forts on the Saxon Coast; he also carries out the traditional punitive expedition into Scotland. However, this is the final optimistic scene before a tragic epilogue.

In the first years of the fifth century, the last Roman divisions leave the island, setting off for war against the Goths. The islanders are alone, left to their own resources. Pleas for Roman aid remain unanswered. The empire's mighty ship is sinking and no one cares now about the island in the north. The last Roman—emperor Aetius—must have read the Britons' appeal and description of their plight with impotent irony: "the barbarians are pushing us toward the sea and the sea casts us back upon the barbarians."

Christianity—"the religion of slaves"—takes on the Roman inheritance and the role of defender of civilization. Toward the end of the 420's Saint Germain of Auxerre arrives on the island on what one might call a theological mission, namely to do battle with the heresy of the British monk Pelagius, of whom Saint Jerome said with truly senatorial disdain that "stuffed with Scottish oatmeal, he suffers from a failure of memory." In 429 no Roman centurion but this very Saint Germain leads the British militia into battle against the Picts with a cry of *Halleluiah*.

II

SO GRZESIO TAUGHT US Latin; I would be lying if I said the subject was easy and that we devoted ourselves to it with joyous zeal. But first I want to describe our preceptor. He was a man in his prime, tall, strapping, with a finely proportioned build. He had olive skin, like the peoples of the Mediterranean (later we found out he came from Colchis). A stern face, a large eagle's nose whose bridge supported a *pince-nez*, the only element of the face that belonged not to Antiquity but to Galicia. Black slightly wavy hair and large, penetrating eyes.

For us he was the personification of manliness, and also of Romanness, and it was easy for us to imagine him in a purple-lined toga or at the head of legions. He seldom smiled, and when he did it was sardonically, the scale of his wrath on the other hand was unequaled in its wealth and nuance—from an ironic hiss through a rhetorical tirade on the duties of youth, to a thunderbolt falling like Jove's: Sit down, you blockhead! We

bore these blows with humility, knowing well that *qui bene amat*[13]*, bene castigat*.

The first lessons in our textbook in its innocent green cover with the title *Puer Romanus*, were childishly easy. Short sentences in the indicative, like *Terra est rotunda* (this statement would have worried the Romans), did not trouble even the most hardened barbarians. We plodded through five declinations without great effort (the favorite being the fourth and simplest), by the method of choral recitation of all singles and plurals, always with the inseparable adjective—*puer bonus, servus miser*—and these litanies repeated out loud quickly engraved themselves on our minds.

The conjugations presented a much greater problem because of their—in our view—exaggerated elaboration of tenses, so we hung strips of paper above our beds on which we wrote in red pencil the magical spells of endings: -o, -as, -at, -amus, -atis, -ant; -abam, -abas, -abat, -abamus, -abatis, -abant; -abo, -abis…and lulled by them as by bells we sailed into our anxious school dreams, in which Grzesio appeared in the guise of a god or tyrant.

Until finally we came to the highest degree of initiation—syntax—and here began the forest, the lair, and the gnashing of teeth. These were no banal little phrases thought up by kind-hearted pedagogues to familiarize us with the tongue of our cultural forefathers, but the periods of classical orators and philosophers, splended as porticos and long as sleepless nights.

"Gavius hic[14]*, quem dico, Consanus, cum in illo numero civium Romanorum ab isto in vincla coniectus esset et nescio qua ratione clam e lautumiis profugisset Messanamque venisset, qui tam prope iam Italiam et moenia Reginorum, civium Romanorum, videret et ex illo metu mortis ac tenebris quasi luce libertatis et odore aliquo legum recreatus revixisset, loqui Messanae et queri coepit se civem Romanum in vincla coniectum, sibi recta iter esse Romam, Verri se praesto advenienti futurum".* Argh!

So we crawled over these texts like a flock of stray birds, pecking at the subject, predicate, and then the attributes,

objects, and adverbials. From the thicket of dependent clauses we pried the main clause, we ordered tenses according to the *consecutio temporum*[15] and deviations from the *consecutio temporum*. The lazier among us used ponies, but this generally ended disastrously (with infamy, worse than a bad grade), because for Grzesio it wasn't all about a smooth translation but an effort to enter into the spirit of the language and its internal architecture. Whoever translated too freely or failed to explain grammatical structure was unmasked as using someone else's work and invariably fell from a candidate for Roman citizenship to the ranks of a slave. To avoid this we wrote notes in the margins of our texts: "*accusativus cum infinitivo, ablativus absolutus, gerundium…"*, which was meant to protect us from trick questions. In vain. Our professor condemned cribs, erased all helpful notes in our books with a great big eraser and simply demanded that we have Latin in our blood.

In those days no one (or almost no one) important questioned the use of teaching classical languages in schools. Nor did anyone promise us any material benefits flowing from reading Plato or Seneca in the original. It was simply an exercise of the mind, and also a molding of character, as we were struggling with difficult things and to this day I'm not sure—for no one has proven it—Latin isn't better than solving linear equations.

Our pedagogues, and Grzesio was a classic example, did not adhere to the novel discoveries of the Freudian school and paid absolutely no attention to whether or not they were cultivating complexes in us. They were probably right. The cruelty of school prepared us for the cruelties of life. And later it also turned out that complexes are valuable and enrich one's inner life.

So we learned Latin from Grzesio. How? In torment. There was a virtually military drill in the classroom, and the air was full of F's. When the atmosphere became unbearable, our centurion-professor would raise us up from our desks and allow us to shout at the top of our voices (anything as long as it was in Latin), most often "*Ave, Caesar, morituri te salutant*."

So we cried and uniting in the cry, we conquered our fear and weakness of spirit.

ONE OF THE FOUNDATIONS of Roman power and its main guarantor was the Roman army. It has been compared to the empire's heart and its backbone. Truly, it was a military force without equal in its own time, and it is difficult to find an army resembling it in later history. So it is worth asking ourselves what was the secret to its successes. But before we try to answer that question, let us return for a moment to the legions in Britain.

The invading Roman forces in 43 A.D. were made up of four legions, as I have said; two more landed on the island later. How long did the particular legions remain in Britain and where should we look for their main concentration points?

The II Augusta (the legion was called this because it was formed during emperor Augustus's rule) was initially stationed at Gloucester (Glevum), but it was transferred to the fortress of Caerlon (Isca) in southern Wales in 71 in connection with an offensive in the west; it stayed there until the end of the third century. After the military reorganization of Diocletian's time it was partly transferred to the Scottish coast, and stationed at Fort Richborough (Rutupiae) not far from what is now Sandwich in the county of Kent.

The IX Hispana (brought over from Spain, hence the name) was at the fortress of Lincoln (Lindum) until 71, then farther north in York (Eboracum), the main Roman settlement on the island, where the emperors resided during their visits to Britain. Around 120 A.D. this legion is withdrawn and replaced with the VI Victrix—which remains in York until the very end of the occupation.

The XIV Gemina (Gemini—probably the fusion of two legions) will remain on the island until 70, after which it is sent to Germany.

The XX Valeria was probably stationed first at Gloucester and transferred to Chester (Deva) in Wales around 78. Its exact

fate is not known. Most probably it was withdrawn toward the end of the fourth century to defend the northern border of the empire.

The II Adiutrix (created by emperor Vespasian on the Adriatic coast as a reserve legion), sent to Britain in 71 occupies the fortress of Lincoln (left by the IX legion); later it is transferred to Chester and withdrawn to the Danube in 86. All this is said to do away with the traditional picture of legions frozen and motionless on the borders of the empire.

The vast expanse of the Roman Empire (3,340,000 square kilometers under Hadrian), its land border stretching across ten thousand kilometers, its wars and conquests may all lead to the assumption that Rome was a military state, in which every other citizen was under arms or employed by the military. This is an erroneous supposition. The Roman army's numbers, even in the period of its greatest development, are estimated at less than half a million. Taking into account that in Augustus's time—statisticians calculate—the total population of the empire was 54 million, we get an indicator of less than 1 percent of citizens in arms.

It was therefore quality, not quantity—training, organization, strategic ability, that determined the supremacy of the Roman eagles. On the battlefield the Romans encountered noble volunteers, horsemen who were defending their freedom. They themselves entered the ranks of a standing army based on recruitment, and each soldier was a specialist in his art.

The number of legions and thus of front line divisions shows a remarkable constancy during the long history of the empire: it barely wavers between 27 to 33 (or as other authors would have it, 25 to 35). The ranks of the legions were made up of Roman citizens; they were usually stationed on the empire's borders. In the capital there was only the Pretorian Guard, the bodyguards of the emperor who accompanied him on his campaigns. In the empire's later period it was a powerful political player and often exerted an influence on the election and bloody removal of emperors.

The legions were supplemented by allied forces, the so-called auxilia. They came from neighboring provinces and were under the leadership of native commanders, who initially retained some strategic autonomy, since they did battle in their own way, as for example the Syrian archery divisions or the heavily-armored Sarmatian cavalry. From the time of Augustus these divisions were an integral part of the Roman army, subject to its chief command.

The legions were also accompanied in battle by irregular units of footsoldiers—*numeri*—and cavalrymen—*cunei*, who were recruited from among the warriors of newly conquered borderland tribes. These were not choice divisions, they were most often poorly trained, but nevertheless they could be very useful in some situations. Historians have discovered that an exotic division was stationed in Lancaster in Britain and later in South Shields—*Numerus Barcariorum Tigrisiensium*—which as its name indicates, came from the banks of the distant Tigris. At the time of the ephemeral conquest of the land of Parthians by Septimus Severus this numerus was formed and later transported to Britain, where it worked on the construction of military barges across the river Tyne and Morecambe Bay, because their wide and shallow bankside waters were reminiscent of the water conditions of the Tigris.

The commander of the legion and the auxiliary divisions attached to it was the *legatus legionis*—invariably a senator of about thirty years old, who normally exercised the duties for three years. His deputy was the *praefectus castrorum*, responsible for training, internal organization, equipment, and provisions. The highest ranking officers subordinate to the legate were six tribunes. Tribunes (an institution conceived as a preparation for a political career) were not in direct command but occupied with administration and jurisdiction.

The *praefectus castrorum* stood at the head of the professional officer corps. He was usually an experienced commander with thirty or more years of uninterrupted military service. The backbone, the firm skeleton of the army were the centurions, sixty of them to each legion—directly responsible for battle training and in direct command of the subordinate centuries, which counted 80 men. The majority of centurions

were drawn from the regular soldiers, but also from the auxiliary forces. The highest ranking centurions, called *primi ordines*, commanded the first cohort of the legion (a cohort—one tenth of the legion—was the basic strategic unit and was made up of six centuries). The head centurion—the *primus pilus*—elected annually, rarely reached this status before he was fifteen or sixteen.

Legionaries spent the greater part of their lives far from their families and native parts. They were like a small itinerant society, so the legions did not only include those who took direct part in battle but also those concerned with the satisfaction of the needs of ordinary life. These administrative and economic functions were often carried out by retired soldiers, the so-called *immunes*. The century's ensign was traditionally the treasurer of the soldiers' loan office and funeral fund, but apart from him other professional civil servants worked to collect contingents of grain, and many diverse *librarii* and *exactores* corresponding to our cashiers and accountants, for they distributed the soldiers' pay, ran the food storehouses and, finally, took care of the wills and estates of soldiers killed in battle.

Military operations on remote and difficult terrain required what we would now call elaborate technical back-up, above all experts able to conduct engineering work ranging from the most straightforward to the most complex. And so each legion had an *architectus*, a specialist in ground and surface works; a *mensor* or geometer who drew up maps of the camps; and a *hydraularius* responsible for water supply to the camps and drainage of bogland. They were furthermore accompanied by a plentiful number of artisans: builders of catapults and siege instruments, ship carpenters, glaziers, arrowmakers, and lastly lumberjacks who cleared the soldiers a path through dense woodlands.

Spiritual guidance for the legions was in the hands of priests and fortune-tellers called *haruspices*. These were not equivalents of priests in a modern army, and for that reason the description "spiritual guide" doesn't really fit. Rather, their task consisted in securing the beneficence of the gods and foretelling the fate, not of particular individuals, but of the

army as a whole. Trajan's Column, that gigantic film reel and invaluable iconographic source for knowledge about the lives of the empire's soldiers, in one of its scenes portrays an animal sacrifice at a battlefield altar: priests with cloaks thown over their heads accompanied by soldiers holding big curved trumpets and horns receive a procession of sacrifice sacrificers.

The army command concerned itself as much with the physical health and fitness of its soldiers as with their arms. The food was healthy and almost entirely vegetarian: cheese, vegetables, noodles made from grain; meat appeared only rarely, but wine flowed freely into the parched throats. The many amphoras and huge clay recepticles found in Britain bear witness to the fact that this was one of the first imported articles on the island.

Every military unit of any size had its own doctor of officer rank; he was usually a Greek, like the Hermogenes whose votive altar we can now examine in the museum in Chester. Subordinate to the doctor were the medics (*medici*) and the nurses (*capsari*), whose name came from the *capsa*, the "first aid kit" with which they were equipped on the battlefield. A fragment of Trajan's Column portrays a soldier in the auxiliary forces laying a bandage on the thigh of a legionary. The art of Greek doctors was unequaled: they deftly carried out complex operations, extractions of foreign bodies; amputations were the bread and butter of the surgeons, who used tar, terpentine, and various decoctions of herbs as antiseptics. Hospitals were founded at many campgrounds and fortresses.

The Roman army's successes—as the majority of authors agree, even enemies of Rome—were not the work of chance or favorable fortunes of war. The extraordinary skill and effectiveness of this military power was based on every campaign, every battle being prepared in the finest detail, and the plans drawn up by the army staff were carried out by soldiers at all levels with iron consistency. Strenuous marches (the late Roman author Vegetius says that at least three times a month they had a ten-mile march in full armor), a muster, called *armatura*, and exercises for the employment of weaponry and tactics were the daily routine of the legionaries

both in peacetime and in war. Josephus Flavius, a man who dared to meet the power of the imperial army head on, captures it in a lapidary phrase. He compares the exercises to a bloodless battle, and battle he calls a bloody exercise.

Of course, the training was not always on the highest level, and changed in different periods. In Republican and early imperial times responsibility for it fell to individual commanders—so it depended on the military knowledge and talent of the particular commanders. Under Caesar the Roman army was incomparably superior to what it was in Augustus's time. The outstanding Roman commander Corbulo (active under Claudius and Nero, made famous by the victorious war against the Parthians), when he arrived in Syria found the Roman troops in a deplorable state. They were stationed not in military camps but quartered in private residences in town, abandoning themselves to life's pleasures. Corbulo assembled the effeminate legion soldiers and had a gigantic march conducted in mid-winter on barren mountainous terrain lashed by an icy wind, during which many perished from cold and exhaustion; but in the spring he could then lead a brilliant and victorious campaign in Armenia at the head of those who withstood this monstrous trial. In the times of Trajan the legions attained a high level of training thanks to the introduction of muster experts called *lanistrae* on the model of the "trainers" at gladiatorial schools.

The list of punishments for violating discipline was long and quite terrifying. Rebellion and desertion were punished by death; if these crimes were committed by larger military units, the units were decimated. A soldier caught sleeping on his watch was stoned by his fellows. Some commanders ordered a deserter's right hand chopped off. The whip was used quite often and for minor infringements—centurions did not carry their grapevine horsewhips just for show. The punishment for the slightest trespass was degradation, loss of pay, punitive exercises, and cut food rations.

From the time the Roman army became a professional army, legion soldiers bound their whole life's career and existence to it. With the exception of the highest officers, they were people deprived of any personal possessions. Outside the

army they were nothing. It guaranteed them a career, insurance in old age, a penny's savings. So it is worth having a look at what they earned. The differentiation of wages clearly underlines the hierarchy of the separate groups in the profession.

During the rule of emperor Domitian a centurion was paid 5000 dinars a year, and this was seventeen times the wages of a common legion soldier; the *primi ordines* (the centurions of each legion's first cohort) got 10 000, or twice the amount of an ordinary centurion. The wages of the chiefs of centurions (*primi pili*) came to twice that: 20 000 dinars. The British researcher Peter Astbury Brunt puts forward a table of wages which reflects the changes from the time of Augustus to Caracalla, or from the beginning of the first century to the third. Under Augustus a common soldier got 225 dinars a year, a centurion 3750, the *primi ordines* 7500, and the *primi pili* 15 000. Two centuries later the wages had more than tripled, and was for the same groups: 750, 12 500, 25 000, and 50 000. This rise expressed in absolute figures is less impressive if we take into account the strong inflation of the Roman coin.

It is difficult to interpret the figures today. They say more about the differentiation in rewards for army service than about a legion soldier's standard of living. Another British scholar, Ralph Westwood Moore, proposes taking the price of grain as an orientational measuring stick, and comes to the conclusion that an ordinary soldier could support himself on two-thirds of his pay, and in later periods on only one-fifth.

But the situation was not as rose-colored as these calculations suggest, since often troop rebellions broke out, with soldiers demanding improvements in their living conditions. The main cause of the rebellion in 14 A.D. described by Tacitus was the fact that the legionaries had to pay for their arms, clothes, and tents out of their own wages. In such cases the emperors preferred in the end not to irritate the main pillars of their power and ceded to the soldiers' demands. To ensure themselves their loyalty, the emperor ascending to the throne allocated large sums to be divided among the legionnaires.

How long did military service last? Under Augustus—16 years, plus four years unarmed service in administrative positions with the legion (as *immunes*). After leaving the army veterans received a retirement gratuity and a plot of land, allies were granted citizenship (in 212 A.D., the Constitutio Antoniniana[16] awarded civil rights to all inhabitants of the provinces). In the first half of the first century, the term of duty was raised to twenty years, and veterans served in the army for five more years; later the period of active duty rose to twenty-five years.

Incorporation into the ranks happened quite early and recruits in their teens were not a rarity. On one of the gravestones in the Grosvenor museum in Chester we read: DIS MANIBUS[17] CAECILIUS AVITUS EMERITA AUGUSTA OPTIO LEG. XX V.V. STIPENDIORIUM XV VIXIT ANNOS XXXIV—which means that the deceased Caecilius Avitus, born in Emerita Augusta, deputy centurion in the XX legion Valeria Victrix served in the army for 15 years and lived for 34. O melancholy!

Edward Gibbon in his famous *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* writes as follows of the Roman legions in Britain: “The lords of the loveliest and richest lands on earth turned away in scorn from gloomy hills lashed by winter storms, from lakes wreathed in blue fog and from cold, unpopulated vistas across which a horde of naked barbarians chased woodland deer.” Gibbon (and following him other authors), undoubtedly idealizes the empire’s soldiers exiled to remote lands. We should not imagine them as pale dejected youths reading the *Meditations* of Marcus Aurelius on stopovers and consumed by longing for Lesbia and Rome. They were more like hearty, brutal musclemen, those defenders of civilization. The ethnic composition of the legions also made it a colorful mosaic in which “real Romans” were a negligible percentage. The overwhelming majority—grave inscriptions prove this—were from Dalmatia, Thrace, Spain, Gaul, the Rhinelands, Dacia, and even faraway Capadoccia and Syria. They probably communicated with each other in an inelegant Latin that had as much in common

with Cicero as the language of the recruits in Franz Jozef's army had with Hofmannsthal's German.

Each legion was stationed in a permanent camp, around which the local population and that of inflowing merchants and artisans were grouped. Up to the beginning of the third century A.D., soldiers were not allowed to enter into a legal marriage during the time they were serving their military duty. On the other hand they had concubines, and sons resulting from these liaisons were usually incorporated into the legions. Those born in lands remote from the capital knew Rome only from stories, and the emperor's face from portraits carried by the ensign—the *imaginifer*. So it is not strange that the soldiers' ideological ties to the empire and emperor became weaker with every generation.

The border armies gradually changed into territorial forces with poor training and little military value. In 367 A.D., at the time of a great attack by the Saxons, Picts, and Scots, the legions' being taken by surprise was entirely due to the treachery of soldiers patroling the border, whom the barbarians had promised a part in the distribution of booty. At that time instances of desertion were common.

The character and even the external appearance of garrison towns and fortresses also changed beyond recognition. An expert on this period, Ian A. Richmond, writes of this as follows: "New soldiers lived with their wives and children entirely within the forts, hastily rebuilt after invasions by local laborers. The forts became small fortified courts, more reminiscent of medieval courts than the Romans' *castellum*; on the model of medieval soldiers, they received adjacent farmland as recompense after they finished their service. This new organization, or rather its lack, contributed to the devastation of buildings set up along traditional lines; this has been revealed in many forts, where granaries became residences and the buildings for the army staff became shops. A centurion of the old school would have paled at the sight."

III

IN SPITE OF THE iron discipline Grzesio imposed on us (or perhaps because of it) we liked (though the word conveys neither the nature nor the intensity of the emotion) both him and his subject. With time the classes came to include not just laborious translation and the polishing of our grammar but were partially devoted to ancient culture and civilization. Then we did not only probe the mystery of the conjunctive but acquainted ourselves with daily life in the imperial capital, the armor of a legionary, the ritual of the Saturnalia.

Naturally this was an idealized Rome, a Rome of civic virtues, stern manhood. Neither the scandalous lives of the emperors as described by Suetonius nor the obscenities from the walls of Pompeii polluted our consciousness. Scipio the Elder, Cato, the Gracchi, the good emperors of the Antonine line were offered to us as models worthy of emulation. We knew, of course, of the plight of slaves, of the cruel persecution of Christians, the follies of Caligula, but the star of reason shone brightly over the darkness.

I don't know when it happened (and it probably didn't happen all of a sudden) that Latin began to absorb and fascinate us. At first, if I remember correctly, it was the sound of it, grave, metallic, and yet clear: the harmony of well-distributed consonants and vowels. The simplest sentences had a line, a strongly drawn contour, as if carved in stone. *Eadem nocte accidit, ut esset luna plena*—It happened that night there was a full moon. The same thing, and yet not the same. So we wound our gnome's speech, the speech of the earth and its whispers, like ivy around a marble column.

In my interest in Latin and my admittedly mediocre progress in that sphere there lay an element I might call personal. In the apartment building across the road from us there lived a young person, whose full shape, auburn hair, and dimples stirred my senses and gave me vertigo. She was the daughter of a Latin professor—not from our *gymnasium*, it is true, but known to us as the author of the book of adapted texts over which we labored; he also published articles in the monthly *Philomat*, to which Grzesio obliged us to subscribe through him. I used to sit on the balcony with my Auerbach &

Dąbrowski Latin grammar and pretend that reading this exceptionally dull tome put me in ecstasy.

It was in fact an act of despair. If the object of my passionate feelings appeared on the balcony, it was not for my sake. She sometimes brushed me with a distracted look, as one glances at clouds moving across the sky. She was waiting for an older colleague of mine from the *lyceum*, a tall youth with a wavy blond crop, undeniably handsome (he was the standard-bearer of our school and wearing a sash and white gloves at celebrations he really did present well)—but I knew he could never make her happy. Every day around five in the afternoon she would leave the house with my mortal enemy and disappear around the corner into a little street shaded by chestnut trees, where (my feverish imagination told me) terrible things happened: he would take her arm (against the severest injunctions of middle-school rules) and perhaps press a fiery kiss on her silken glove. A storm of contradictory feelings in my tormented heart:

> *Odi et amo*[18]*. Quare id faciam, fortasse requiris.*
>
> *Nescio, sed fieri sentio et excrucior.*

What did I think to achieve, holding my Auerbach & Dabrowski Latin grammar on the balcony so that its cover would be visible from afar? I thought that one day her father—the classical philologist—would notice me and shout across to me: “I have been observing you for a while now, my boy. Your modesty and industry, your love for the Roman tongue are a warranty that you are a proper candidate for my daughter’s husband. I therefore grant you her hand.” And from then on things would proceed as in a fairy tale.

They didn’t. On the other hand, I learned many examples of the use of the more complicated grammatical forms by heart and was able to shine in class, even winning a cordial look from Grzesio.

We labored in the sweat of our brows. The time to reap drew near: the next year we were to proceed to the poetry of

Catullus and Horace. But then the barbarians invaded.

HOW TO EVALUATE THE civilizational contribution by Rome in Britain? Scholars have given various answers to this question. The British archaeologist Francis John Haverfield says: “From the Romans who once ruled Britain, we Britons inherited virtually nothing.” The view of the excellent historian George Macauley Trevelyan seems more just. In his *History of England* he writes: “Ultimately the Romans left behind three valuable things: first (and this claim would amuse and astonish Caesar, Agricola, and Hadrian), Welsh Christianity; second, Roman roads; third, the growing importance of some of the new cities, and especially London. On the other hand, the Latin way of life in cities and villas, and the art, language, and political organization of the Romans vanished like a dream. The most important fact about the early history of the island was negative, namely that the Romans failed to latinize Britain in any lasting manner, as they had France.”

Founding cities was not a disinterested beneficence on the part of the occupiers, it must be said. As Pierre Grimal rightly emphasizes, the Romans treated the cities they founded as powerful political instruments. “The Roman city could not be reduced simply to a collection of specific material conveniences, it was above all an omnipresent symbol of the religious, political, and social system that were the basic component of Roman civilization.”

Archaeologists discovered twenty-odd large urban centers on the island deriving from Roman times. They were mainly founded on the sites of former tribal capitals. Surrounded by a wall and laid out in the typical Roman square pattern, Silchester (Calleva) had barely 80 houses, and the number of its inhabitants most likely did not exceed fifteen hundred. With the exception of London, whose population at its peak of development is estimated by scholars at 15 000, the other cities rarely exceeded a number of 3 000 inhabitants. What gave them an urban character was their being the seat of

municipal authority, with public buildings—a characteristic Roman forum in the city center, with a capitol, the main temple of the official religion, a curia—where sessions of the provincial senate were held, a basilica, where a court deliberated, a theater and amphitheater, and spas fulfilling the role of clubs or today's cafés. They decorated the city with triumphal arches, columns, and statues—in a word, these cities were small, often inept copies of the capital of the Empire.

SHORT PROSE (1948–1998)[1]

translated by

Alissa Valles

[1] Unless another source is given, these pieces are from the prose collection *Węzeł Gordyjski* (*The Gordian Knot*: Warsaw 2001), edited by Paweł Kądziela.

POETRY IN A VACUUM?[1]

THE BOOKSELLER ON whose counter I put down two slim volumes I'd found on a high shelf, looked at me in disbelief.

"Poetry," he marveled, "but almost nobody buys that these days. It's commercial waste paper."

That last phrase, though softened by the adjective "commercial," grated on my ear for a long time. On the way home I wondered, mournfully: are we really seeing the demise of poetry? Is this oldest of literary genres departing to the cemetery of exhausted forms? Forms too diminutive for the coming content? Does emotion lie under the threshold of sensitivity in a person of our atomic era?

In spite of everything, poetry exists. There are poets who write poems, publish defenseless little books, literary journals print experts' polemics, critics are led by the nose. Only the whole movement is suspended in air, because a poet's word never becomes a household word. Contemporary poetry is ridiculed by the average reader, and school has done an expert job of making the classics repugnant. The number of people who read poetry is minuscule—it's an inarguable fact.

Let's try to find the causes of this state of affairs, let's try to find a way out.

It is said that poetry, particularly contemporary poetry, is difficult, even incomprehensible. It's a bunch of linguistic flails and shards devoid of any shred of meaning, wail the outraged citizens. They think writing poems means the erasure of beauty, the rejection of clarity. Just like the old joke: you paint herrings in green so it's harder to guess what they are. This complaint turns entirely on the problem of poetic language.

If we tell an acquaintance about something that happened on the bus yesterday, we seek to inform our listener about the occurrence, to describe it as exactly as possible. Our whole attention and his are both fixed on "what" happened, "what" we're saying. The style of telling will naturally be very simple, casual, maybe even clumsy.

If we now undertake to put some poetic work, like Mickiewicz's *Akerman Steppes*[2] "in our own words," we see that the prose translation is very remote from the original. For two reasons. First, the meaning has changed, even if we used the same words, and second, all of the work's beauty has vanished, evaporated like camphor. Hence the conclusion that Mickiewicz's formulation was the best and therefore unique. And furthermore, that it's not only "what" is said that determines the value but above all "how" it is said, and that you cannot change the order of words or lines in a poem. A poem is not a machine whose constituent parts can be changed without damage to the whole. For poetry—as one of our leading contemporary poets said—is what cannot be expressed in prose. The poet deforms, remolds, creates language to express what cannot be expressed otherwise.

We will return more than once to this fundamental problem. In future articles we will attempt to clarify to our readers what constitutes the beauty of poetry. We will speak of how poems are built, of what one should look for in poetry.

"But is poetry necessary to life? Isn't it a luxury toy for the lazy rich? Does it have any real value?"

One could write a hefty tome on how poetry, in the course of its development, has paved the way for new ideas, how it has fought for freedom, progress, social justice, and peace. For the task of great poetry, as of all writing, is to render justice to the visible world. Justice and beauty.

One could also write a book about what we Poles owe to poetry. I refer to the recent past. During the occupation even the least sensitive people felt the true value of poetry. The partisan song was a shorthand for rage, the camp poem an eye of hope, a few lines in a newspaper were a rhythmic pattern of our longing.

But poetry cannot be an ark to help us survive the flood. It has to be our daily bread, an article of primary need.

In olden days the poet was a sorcerer; many centuries later he played the sorcerer, when he said he expressed the mysterious meaning of existence. To underscore his unearthliness he fenced himself off from society. He looked down from above on all those who didn't admire him, fitting them all with epithets, from layman to soap merchant.

This conflict of the individual with society didn't benefit either the health of society or poetry. The conflict endures, when one of our contemporaries writes that poetry is a "tangent of solitude"—No, sir! Poetry is not some kind of trigonometric function. It's a human, an arch-human function. After many errings it will reach its destination and then it will be the conversation of one feeling creature with another.

1948

SHIELD US FROM THE DARK WORD…[1]

IT IS SAID that language is the material of poetry, what stone is to the sculptor and sound to the musician. This similitude can be further developed to say that stone is used not only to sculpt heroes but to make flagstones, and a trumpet has one meaning in a Weber opera and another as a traffic signal.

Let us carry over these observations to the sphere of language and take for example the word "moon." For an astronomer, or in the language of science, it is a specific well-defined heavenly body. For us, or in everyday language, when we say "the moon was full last night," it is simply a bright disc suspended in the sky. So far, so good, but here the devil suddenly pops out of the box. For there is one among us, a normal person even if a poet, who says that the moon is "…my full inkwell, sold me by a traveling peddler…" (Gałczynski[2]). Of course "the moon equals an inkwell" is logical nonsense and it's not the poet's intention to pull the wool over our eyes in such a naïve way. But hence the dislike of poetry felt by all those who read it literally, that is, ascribe to the poetic word its common meaning. What Gałczynski said doesn't topple Copernicus's system, doesn't create any new scientific truth; it may be an expression of intimate affinity with the moon as a source of poetic inspiration. For poets are obliged to use the same signs as market stallholders, magistrates, and journalists, but poets give them another, uncommon meaning of their own, and that way they create a poetic language.

This happens because the expression of thought, emotion, imagination—in short, inner content—demands a more delicate material than our impoverished, sloppy everyday

speech. Someone who doesn't know many words in a foreign language can't find any subtle feelings or profound thoughts in that language.

Every great poetry is a creation of a new language out of old words.

All outstanding poets feel deeply this fundamental problem of literature—the problem of the word. They see their chief task as developing, strengthening, and creating meanings of words in order to express themselves more perfectly.

But there are also poets for whom the word detaches itself from the object, acquiring physical characteristics, living a life of its own. The poet doesn't merely think in words, but words turn into beings that can be heard, touched, seen. We find an excellent example of this poetic oversensitivity in Słowacki:

...who would know what it means[3]
without looking into the soul's realm,
that some words have a bloodier ***color***
and others are as of rainbows spun:
and others, having spilt their ***odor,***
coming to the desperate bard as ***tone,***
fall into a long column of rhyme,
still and soundless corpses in a tomb.

The Symbolists—that group of poets at the end of the nineteenth century (Mallarmé, Verlaine, Rimbaud, Baudelaire, Régnier, and others) who still have a powerful influence on contemporary poetry—ignited a veritable riot over this question.

Rimbaud, the great magus of the word and of Symbolism, says: "I regulated[4] the form and movement of each consonant and with instinctive rhythms I prided myself on inventing a poetic language accessible some day to all the senses…I wrote

silences, I wrote the night. I recorded the inexpressible. I fixed frenzies in their flight."

The greatest vertigo of this word-drunk poet is the famous sonnet in which he reveals the colors of vowels:

Black A[5]*, White E, Red I, Green U, Blue O: vowels.*

Someday I'll explain your burgeoning births:

A, a corset, black and hairy, buzzing with flies

Bumbling like bees around a merciless stench,

And shadowy gulfs…

His epigones went on to develop this fine paradox into a system. To Rimbaud's colors one (and fortunately only one) René Ghil[6] added sounds and emotional states corresponding to those sounds. Poets were to be like magicians pulling rabbits from empty top hats. They outdid each other in subtleties. Huysmans, a remarkable novelist, determined the musical impressions aroused by taste. If there is any meaning to the claim that the letter "z" expresses the instinct of altruistic love or that cumin liqueur corresponds to a nasal oboe, it slips through our fingers, and that isn't our fault. A poet who loved a girl in a green dress, appointed green to be the symbol of love. Poetry turned into a mysterious code for personal experience, losing its communicative, human meaning.

The sad legacy of Symbolist anarchy was passed on to the Dadaists, and the lettrists who, having destroyed the meaning of words, now assemble weird arabesques suited only for a cabinet of literary curiosities.

What Rimbaud did was driven by his astonishing imagination and talent. Many of his successors were stunted by pedantic rules and dry schemas. The word as the element set free in Goethe's ballad would not obey the sorcerer's reckless apprentices.

From all of this a certain lesson can be drawn for readers: let them try to penetrate the value of a word not only by way of its meaning but also by its back stairs, its lining. Let them try to hear its sound, see its shade, its light and weight. And let them not be ashamed of naïve perceptions. If Słowacki's stanza dazzles them with bright radiance, or they hear in Norwid's[7] funeral rhapsody the harsh rattle of armies, they will be closer to poetry than those who conceal their literary deafness under a wreath of learned platitudes.

But the word must return to its mother port—meaning. This is not just an aesthetic problem but also a moral one. Naming objects and things human conduces to their understanding and judgment. Particularly after a chaos of ideas, after the last war, after a flood of lies, poetry must take on the labor of the moral reconstruction of the world by rebuilding the value of words. We have to part good from evil, light from darkness once again.

For that reason the last stanza of a beautiful poem by Jerzy Liebert is the prayer of all poets concerned not only with aesthetic problems but also with the ethical, social dimension of poetry:

Breathe in us, may your hand[8]
pour olive oil onto our breast.
Shield us from the dark word,
From the dark word, save us!

1948

CHARACTER SKETCHES

Augustyn[1]

To Mr Zygmunt Jakimiak

Ama et quod vis fac[2]*!*

Every character is some kind of error!

IF YOU ASKED ME what strikes me most about Augustyn, I'd say: his eyes. They are like inverted mirrors—gray and dysfunctional, as if they were not supposed to reflect light but were turned into the depths of the person looking, Augustyn himself. This is so profoundly at odds with the essence of ordinary common-or-garden eyes that it arouses prejudice from the outset.

Apart from that, I don't like it when Augustyn…but here I tell myself I can't go on like this. After all, this is the mistake made by all who, wishing to characterize this unusual man, begin by enumerating his oddities and flaws. One accusation doesn't exhaust Augustyn's case but draws others on after it, and the more that inventory grows we enter heedlessly into common slander, and annoyed by the fact we multiply our negative comments from a frustrated sense that none of them is accurate, that they neither delineate the man clearly nor erase his form. No, no, you really can't begin by listing Augustyn's sins: I strongly suspect they are virtues which offend us.

Some say Augustyn is a frivolous person. In the most profound discussion he confuses the issue and comes to conclusions so unexpected they make everyone laugh. This laughter isn't directed at Augustyn; it contains the liberated joy of someone who suddenly discovers a startling color in the sky, or the hilarity of a poet who finds a metaphor so absurd it's funny while also being true.

In his reasoning Augustyn is consistent. In his own way, of course, that is to say—without limits. At a certain point we like to say "enough," here a pleasant shade reigns, this is where it's convenient and practical to stop. Augustyn provokes our terror of the absurd, our fear of a boundary, the anxiety of the abyss that opens up only a few steps from the manicured garden of our concepts and values. Speaking of his consistency, I'm also thinking of the fact that it's not objective, external, logical, but on the contrary, internal: a consistency with the world of his own contradictions, as befits a man who does battle with himself, which in Augustyn's case is to say—no mean opponent.

Of course this is not an attempt to explain, but the fact that Augustyn made the long journey from the primordial to the heights of civilization on his own strength, that is, without the involvement of ancestors, may cast a certain light on the matter. We find the traces of this pilgrimage in his mind, where a naïve totemic superstition exists next to a powerfully delineated system full of subtle distinctions and abstractions suspended in air. For example, Augustyn cannot rid himself of a visceral image of hell, as his carnal nature and carnal sins are too deeply rooted to bolt from a dazzle of syllogisms and the five proofs of God's existence.

This is precisely what led one of us to call Augustyn a philosopher in a state of nature.

And this is the right place, the moment to elaborate on Augustyn's system. But I won't, because in my view a man who fights so hard has only tactics, and what he says is more a manifestation of temptations than a formulation of the truth about the world. To conclude this brief introduction to

Augustyn, I have to close it down with one word. I will say the word: ardor.

"PATRYK"
1950

Sylvester

THIS IS HOW I met Sylvester: he sent me a letter and twenty-four poems linked by a common title. I can't remember exactly what it was called: Sonata, Quartet, something like that. I just know the word had in it the high, resonant voice of a flute. It made me eager to read the poems, especially as the letter asking for a review was reserved and unpretentious.

Leafing through the pages I noticed the poems were untitled, which for me is an impediment to reading. I'm in the habit of picking a title from the list of contents, letting my mind dwell on the subject for a moment, and only then reading what the poet thinks about it. That's where the charming and exciting exchange trade of the imagination begins. But here there was no point of contact, everything was marked with three stars (***), and how to make friends with that astronomy?

My initial enthusiasm faded, and when I saw the poems were typed on a German typewriter and, read literally, turned into helpless mumbo-jumbo, I put them away in the bottom lefthand drawer of my desk, where I keep old concert and theater programs. I wrote back that I was leaving town and I'd write a full letter in a month's time.

Of course I forgot. But after a month had passed Sylvester turned up in person, introduced himself and asked for his poems back. That set me against him a little: calls himself a poet, and yet he's so fussy. So I asked him for two more days' time and said the poems were interesting (that adjective seemed most elastic and non-committal). Right after Sylvester left I sat down to read them.

The first words confirmed my sense that I was dealing with an authentic poet. Without any preliminaries he soared

heavenward on the wings of a dazzlingly bold metaphor. An image emerged after the metaphor, but without a transition, without any visible necessity, driven by the pulse of a restless imagination. The image was suffused with air, filled with quivering possibilities, so that it was hard to ascribe to it any lasting shape. It was like a landscape summed up in a sketch by a few lines about to be wiped out by someone's sleeve.

After that image, I thought, the poet will rest and the reflective part will begin. But no, the image again entered the figurative; metaphors now came hard and fast and after a meteoric flight, exploded on the very edge of sight, sailing high in the sky like a display of fireworks. I read as if with my head thrown back. I don't know why, but the image of a poet with the tired mouth of a circus artist flashed before me. That's where I got the title of my review: *On a Trapeze of Dizzy Metaphors*.

I began it enthusiastically by promising a literary revelation: a new lyrical frisson. But on second thought I crossed out the introduction, as its green enthusiasm betrayed my age, pitifully tender for a critic.

Then I started, at first without great conviction, to look for things with which to reproach him. What had knocked me out before, those metaphors, now seemed to me artificial and forced.

In Sylvester I saw a hypertrophism of that fine poetic resource: call it his arrogance. I felt in many cases it destroyed his poetic construction. It was as if someone were building cathedrals solely out of bare Gothic arches, scorning mere bricks and common craftsmanship. That's why the lyricism was replaced by dazzlement, or rather, disorientation. And at the end of the poem, a feeling of loneliness and deprivation: after a splendid show of lightning, when we're waiting for thunder, the poet shoves a handful of loose magnesium powder in our face. In saying "thunder," of course I'm not thinking of an acoustic effect but of an emotion or perhaps a mood, or rather, of the poet's lyrical presence. Whereas Sylvester, having put out a stage set and bathed it in an extraordinary light, left the stage. Writing this I remembered his brief dry

handshake and was pleased by the memory, as if I had found in it a confirmation of my own remarks.

Reading through what I had written again, I was appalled. The review was far from precise; it was full of comparisons, impressions, and images. Not wishing to praise Sylvester directly, I had employed his methods. It was some kind of Sylvestrian spite or revenge, or an involuntary approbation of his poetry.

In the end I didn't know whether the review was favorable or too harsh, so to soften it a little I wrote that in treating Sylvester as severely as if he were a mature poet, I was giving expression to the great hopes I cherished for his poetic future.

A few weeks later he came to see me again. He brought some new poems and said he now lived on the same street as I did. I felt I should spend some time on him, especially as his reading even in the sphere of poetry left a great deal to be desired. I borrowed some classic volumes from the library and made him read aloud. I was astonished to find that Sylvester couldn't read properly and that this inability was organic. Sylvester mixed up words, turned syntax upside down, faltered, and you could tell he couldn't simply follow a text word by word, line by line. This led to little improvisations full of puns and slips of the tongue which cracked both of us up, but sometimes gave birth to an unexpected metaphor. I was usually lying on the couch listening to him with my eyes closed. Just once I saw Sylvester stealthily writing down one of these unearned metaphors on the back of a tram ticket.

Sylvester's consciousness, full of evasions, gaps, and obscurities, functions like a faulty power station. Power failures are compensated for by periods of illumination of the kind nobody with a regular stream of perceptions and emotions will ever know. Hence the blank spots in his images, hence the desire to assemble fragments of reality into a whole, hence those metaphors.

And hence, finally—if I may end this observation on a personal note—hence the thorny problem I acquired. The title of the problem—perhaps I will one day write another, spiteful article about it—is *Poetry as Handicap*.

1950

Anastatius, Or Good Morning

“GOOD MORNING, GOOD MORNING, Mrs. Gut,” says Anastatius when he leaves the building early in the morning. Mrs. Gut never answers, although everyone knows she is up by that time, and you might think that with this daily greeting Anastatius is merely checking that the world cannot accept him and that the mechanism of indifference is working without a hitch.

In the opinion of his neighbors, people characterized by an extraordinary inquisitiveness who have invented a curious defense against disappointments, which is to think the worst of everyone—in the opinion of his neighbors, Anastatius is a tramp and a good-for-nothing. The epithet “good-for-nothing” doesn’t fit the name Anastatius, if only in terms of sound, nor does it harmonize with his gray hair and the fundamentally industrious life he leads.

As for the epithet “tramp,” it could have only arisen in the minds of people who judge from appearances. It’s true that Anastatius does a lot of walking and his tempo is slow, but his walking has nothing of the frivolous levity of the tramp, nor the shaky gait of the beggar.

For Anastatius, it must finally be said, is an honest finder by profession. Yes, you heard me right, and there’s no need to shrug. Please understand the work of a man who covers long city streets and park lanes in the early morning when garbagemen are still asleep, who bends down for every scrap of paper, taps sewers with a cane, or calls out affectionately to a frightened little Pinscher, luring it with a bit of sausage.

Who does not know the feeling of annoyance that comes with losing something? It is not just regret for a lost item of value, there is a much more profound feeling in it: doubt in the order of the world, caused by the sudden intrusion of chance. There is also the natural irritation of a person discovering that objects removed from our sight and grasp cease to exist for us.

Of course, Anastatius is not entirely aware of the philosophical dimension of his profession, however much he has built up a sense of the dignity and weight of his endeavors. The only thing that worries him is how people reveal their robust egoism at moments of joy. Glad at regaining what they lost, they disappear into their apartments, leaving Anastatius in the hall, or they invite him in for a cup of tea, afraid of insulting the nice old man by offering him money. In fact the business is more complicated than that and has nothing of the relationship of a butcher to a lover of sausages. Anastatius never asks for any reward, he drinks the tea, which is an additional sacrifice—I don't know if you know what tea can do to an empty stomach.

As we have done so much to clear Anastatius of slander, let us see this matter to an end. Let us defend him against two charges that Mrs. Gut sums up with the unsophisticated terms "glutton" and "palmist."

There's no use denying Anastatius likes poppy-seed pastries. But this does no one any harm, though the pleasure of eating sweets before bed may bother those who don't understand the joys of life to which our little weaknesses contribute. On the other hand, the hunt for poppy-seeds around Anastatius' bed says more about Mrs. Gut than the strongest language.

And now, palmistry. Anastatius' mysterious passion for calendars sufficed to prompt this accusation. Anastatius has collected calendars for years, and on top of that he buys old almanacs in second-hand shops. He's simply touched by the forecast for a good harvest in 1914, or the fact that Easter in 1881 fell on April 13.

Anastatius goes to bed late. He is usually tired out by running around all day, but happy. No one can imagine what inner peace comes to a man who has given someone back world harmony in the form of a found wallet.

Before falling asleep Anastatius softly says "good night"—whether to Mrs. Gut or someone else, I don't know.

And now, now do you understand that Anastatius sleeps the sleep of the just…?

1950

Benedict

BENEDICT IS JUST IN the middle of writing a penetrating study on the necessity of cruelty when the phone rings. The melody of the approaching sentence fades, his train of thought withers, his mood swivels and falls. Benedict picks up the phone. From the depths of the ebony blackness comes a gentle feminine voice. A mundane, conventional conversation. Benedict controls his impatience and with well-feigned delight arranges a meeting in a café at six. Not until a moment later does he remember he is supposed to spend the afternoon translating a novella for which the editors have been waiting two months.

In the view of many acquaintances, Benedict is the embodiment of politeness. Benedict never turns you down, it's enough to say: "Hey, Ben, I have a big favor to ask you," already he's smiling and nodding in agreement. And it's not only for people he knows; sometimes he insists on declaring his disinterested readiness to complete strangers.

Benedict suffers greatly from the lack of composition in life, and perhaps for that reason he values it above all else in literature. He is entirely at the mercy of people who confide in him about their big problems and little problemlets.

Besides, Benedict is an ideal person to confide in, especially for disappointed women. He is invaluable at times when you're looking for someone who doesn't ask questions, doesn't give advice, but is silent and sympathetic. These confessions would furnish material for more than one novel. Fortunately, the temptation to be indiscreet is very weak with Benedict, because he is a poet and essayist, that is, he practices art forms beautifully remote from simple life experiences.

His tireless inner hospitality and pathological readiness to sacrifice himself have all the marks of weakness. What is only

a convention, this obsession with politeness, could be a virtue. But that would take strength, rigor of choice, and a pinch of cruelty.

Those who don't like Benedict accuse him of inner sophistry, spiritual obscurantism. But it is more a case of the untempered sensitivity of a boy unable to gather his diffuse gestures of tenderness, smiles, warm words, and comforting letters into one true manly love.

But now Benedict has fallen in love. Spiteful tongues say he fell in love out of politeness. This casts a dark shadow on his sentiment. The wise, kind girl who loves him very much is worn out by Benedict's incomprehensible arguments for love as a sacrifice. She doesn't understand why they should constantly be denying themselves something; why complicate things that are in fact simple?

Benedict, melting with unexpected happiness, is tormented by the thought that his love is not Christian because it demands exclusivity, commands him to be an egoist.

After the first tearful scene Benedict decides to go away to another town whose only virtue is that no one knows him there. He leaves without saying goodbye, fully conscious of the shame of his flight. He decides to live in absolute solitude, to serve his friends anonymously through his art rather than by his helpfulness and doubtful knowledge of life.

There's a fat lady in his compartment. She is uninterruptedly eating a crumbling sweet bun. She doesn't look very nice but when she starts to tell Benedict in confidence the whole story of her complicated court case…

On the third day of his stay in the other town Benedict goes to see his accidental acquaintance with a bunch of flowers, having just had a great idea for rescuing her from her troubles. He doesn't remember anything of his vow of solitude or his unfinished study on the necessity of cruelty, on the necessary dose of ruthlessness crucial both to a conscious art and to a good life.

1950

Timon

THE CORNERS OF TIMON'S mouth are deposits of bitterness. They contain the summarized story of his wasted life. In his youth he studied art history. He even wrote an interesting (unpublished) dissertation that attracted the attention of his masters: *The Evolution of the Acanthus Leaf in the Gothic Cathedrals of Northern France* (a contribution to the history of ornamentation). A year before Timon finished his studies, his father died and as the oldest child, he had to take care of his mother and siblings. He took some idiotic job at the "Treasury" and worked relentlessly, without feeling the charm of voluntary sacrifice, waiting in tense anticipation for revenge, for a last fine gesture to pass himself on to posterity as he wanted to be, not as life had made him.

His work and sacrifice were in vain. One of his brothers (the most talented) drowned himself, the other ran away to America and renounced his family (it appears he did pretty well for himself). One of his sisters made a terrible marriage. Her husband deserted her, leaving her a truckload of children. His mother died a slow death of some complicated illness in an expensive health care facility.

In despair, Timon married a poor cowed girl who didn't understand him or their children or their house, where she felt taken in like a stray cat. "Oh well"—Timon concluded every attempt to communicate with his wife—"you're a poor dolt." There was a gentle resignation and a spark of tenderness in these words.

In spite of everything Timon (hats off here) remained faithful to his scholarly passions. He subscribed to a thick art history quarterly, read quite a bit, filled dozens of notebooks with summaries, polemics, outlines of projects, all of which perished during the war. No note was taken of this, however, in any statement of cultural war damage.

After the war Timon and his family settled in the little town of M. in Warmia. M. had a magnificent Gothic cathedral. It was above its station, dissatisfied and indifferent to the bleak

surroundings as if it had been brought from the capital for an exhibition. Timon studied the cathedral, its history, made a catalogue of its noteworthy features, ferretted around in source materials.

It happened that a professor of art history, famous and, on top of everything, from Krakow, came to town. Two months later Timon read the professor's article in the quarterly.

The next issue of the quarterly carried a letter by Timon to the editors, correcting errors and inaccuracies. The affair had all the appearance of a major scholarly scandal. Some guy from the provinces without any kind of name was telling a professor his business. Each lengthy paragraph began with a spiteful phrase along the lines of: "if the professor had less confidence in his own erudition and regarded the sources with due respect" or "it would have been easy to avoid these unfortunate errors by seeking information from a random townsperson. But then one would have had to lower oneself to the level of the locals," and so on. And in fact if you disregarded the style and the fact that this was revenge years in the making, everything in Timon's letter was trivial and helplessly minor, it was all about inessential trifles, a few mixed up dates, some details of no importance omitted.

A few months after that great day Timon died. The quarterly put a short notice in the obituary section. Next to Timon's name they wrote: "Art Historian from M."

And I truly don't know whether that was a belated tribute or a tactless joke. I only know that if human feeling had access to Timon, now looking at the world from the perspective of eternity, the fact would fill him with a new variety of bitterness.

Adrian, Or the Limits of Intelligence

SOMEONE APTLY SAID OF him that he was a child once and it appears he was the way he is now from the very beginning, he was born a statue. This is probably because he is perfectly handsome, that is, he fits his own shape exactly,

doesn’t overrun his limits and apparently has no desire to do so.

Someone aptly said that Adrian fits wholly into his own chiselled head, into his own measured gestures and his own pure and passionless prose. After all, he is a writer, that is, he truly speaks only when he is silent. Every year he writes a new book that the public and the critics receive with cool recognition. Not once has his work provoked a debate, no one from the younger generation has attacked his reputation, no one has ever questioned his position, which is wrapped in a unanimous silence as if it weren’t occupied now but already belonged to history.

And no one but he himself even guesses that it’s like this because Adrian isn’t simply an artist.

When he sits down to a new book, its characters, structure, and all of its words lie clearly inside him, right under the surface, he doesn’t need to struggle to find them, nor does their birth give him joy. He covers blank sheets of paper with his even, legible writing, virtually without crossings-out, and only the hope of sudden vision can compensate for the bitterness of the “great Adrian’s” long bureaucratic hours.

Adrian is too intelligent to make mistakes, but he knows that if he managed to write under his own level, he would be alive, someone worthy of quarrels, someone disturbing. The cold intellect that carefully protects him from mistakes with equal scrupulousness protects him from inspiration.

Franciszka, or Belated Love

FRANCISZKA LIVES IN HARMONY with the library, engulfed by its gray background, sucked into the leather bindings of the books that line the walls. She doesn’t disturb the gravity of the institution with the color of her dress, or a smile, or with a busy search for books. She has a solemn, hushed voice, her gestures are controlled and quiet. Looking at her you would hardly imagine that apart from her life at the library she had any kind of private life. And so readers joke

that when the library closes she is fitted out with a shelf code and shut up in the rare manuscripts cabinet.

For some time now Franciszka hasn't left work with the other library employees but has stayed on into the evening under the pretext of ordering books or checking the catalogue. During this time a young man paces up and down the dark street, between two islands of light—the patient footman of love.

Franciszka is always surprised that he waits for her so patiently, and worse, she tells him so. She says that after all she is old and ugly, she doesn't deserve love, it must be a mistake that will soon be cleared up. She behaves this way so the farewell scene will find her prepared, so she can say she has long been expecting it.

When they walk together in silence, she feels the warmth of his arm and perishes at the thought that this arm will abandon her one day. But now, while it lasts, she feels an undeserved happiness she is afraid to admit to and which she can neither capture nor keep.

For this love has come at the wrong time. She is unable to capture it and fence it in. Just as the special "Beauty" soap she secretly uses is unable to return the "matte sheen of youth" to her face.

Everything in life must be cultivated. Even the use of a rare and singular happiness.

Barbara

BARBARA IS JUST PUTTING on her shabby but well-cut fur coat; smiling, she rubs her lips against the sealskin collar as if to say she likes it. She has a wide plain face, tranquil dark eyes and a perpetual, somewhat passive, smile.

Barbara is young, but neither travel nor psychology appeals to her. On the other hand she likes her dresses, her knick-knacks, her one-room sublet filled with flowers and napkins, well and she likes herself too.

However, Barbara is not so wrapped up in herself that it limits her. She studies a subject that testifies to the originality of her interests, but she does so partly to feel the pleasure of returning from ancient history, as if from a house filled with tempests and currents, to the warm present filled with us.

She only pays attention to people who are in some way connected to her. But in seeking such connections, multiplying and inventing them, Barbara is indefatigable and full of ingenuity. That's why it's hard to pigeonhole her as an ordinary egoist.

Barbara only likes people when they are with her and pay attention to her. She talks a lot, interestingly and colorfully, giving the most minor episodes in her life an epic twist, building artful dramas from everyday scenes.

"So, imagine, I was on the 4 yesterday. It was crowded as usual, so I made my way up toward the front. In the middle I bumped up against a lady with a poodle on her lap. The poodle looks at me and suddenly goes *grrrr*. It didn't look at anybody else, just me—everyone on the tram noticed. There I'm standing, heroically, not even blinking, while shivers are going up and down my spine, and the poodle is going *grrr* and *grrrrrr*, louder and louder. So what do you know, the lady had to get off, she was afraid her little mutt would tear me limb from limb."

(She is now gazing into the listener's eyes, organizing his forced hilarity and laughing her own exuberant laugh.)

When the person she's talking to doesn't feel like listening anymore and gets up to go, Barbara holds his hand a long time in her warm, broad palms, which somehow nobody wants to make their permanent home.

HAMLET ON THE BORDER OF SILENCE[1]

Reconstruction of space and time

I CAN SAY "ELSINORE, Elsinore" over and over again, holding my head in my hands, but no image rises from the depths of my imagination to the surface of my closed eyes. Nor can I accept what others' fancies offer me; even a real photograph of the castle at Kronborg clashes with my irrational certainty that it could not have happened there. The guide to the castle points at a marble urn called Hamlet's grave and says with solemn irony: "This is the one place on earth where we are sure the remains of the Danish prince do not rest."

If one can see an abyss, then an abyss is what I see: a cliffside with a sea roaring down below, the places where the Ghost led Hamlet. Farther on a little mist and stone, clouds and blackness. I clearly feel a north-west wind on my face, that wind of inspired madness. Clouds, sea, and wind, the frail framework holding a world full of impaired visibility.

The inability to place the tragedy in any setting constituted an important juncture in my personal experience. I understood that Elsinore means everywhere, that it is a nameless space, a flat table on which fate throws its dice.

The other abstract hero of the tragedy, time, is more tangible and sensual. In ancient tragedy it is a merely objective factor, seemingly independent of the author. The heroes move on the regular feet of verse towards peaks on the ridge of their destiny. The eye of the poet and spectator observes things that cannot be contained in any historical category. Orestes

eternally raises his innocent criminal's sword, Antigone presses her stubborn lips together (no! no!), Prometheus suffers without end. In tragic Tartarus, the history of the protagonists is granted the grace or curse of lasting absolutely.

Anyone who wants to use the same scale for a modern tragedy will encounter the problems of commentators and their misunderstandings at the very outset. If you don't understand how the subjectivization of time is manifested, if you aren't able to read time's changing current, you will make the error of all who, saving the work's regularity of structure, distort its meaning and the characters' inner truth.

How does time flow in *Hamlet*, in those twenty scenes artificially divided up into acts? How many hours, days, weeks, are contained in the black frame of two nights: the night on the ramparts and the night over the Prince's dead body? Who has studied and who has tried to read the changing pulse of the tragedy? The dividing lines of the acts roughly indicate changes of tempo: Acts I, III, and V carry a condensed charge of time and are separated by restful acts, especially the leisurely fourth, written as if to prepare the tragedy's finale, in which the sword assaulting the Prince strikes sparks off the quick seconds.

Whenever his figure appears on the stage we experience a pervasive sense of time thickening. Not only because he is the main character in the tragedy and not because we are aware that he will do the deed. Hamlet accelerates time by his very own existence, by the pain of his remembrance, the effort of his thought. He strives toward the denouement not only in action and in word but in his stubborn silence, his feverish existence. In the face of this immediately felt truth the lame theory of hesitation and "Hamletizing" breaks down, the theory of those who, paralyzed by the time of watchmakers, forgot time's old measure, the contractions of a human heart.

Over the stage hangs a sultry air that quickens the luxurious vegetation of beings, passions, and fates. In the course of a few hours an entire life can play itself out: one scene has room for many deaths. That intensity of theatrical life stifles any question about the heroes' past.

However, I cannot refrain from thinking about who Hamlet was before, beyond the stone ring of Elsinore, back when he was simply a student at the university of Wittenberg. I know it's tactless, justified only as the tactlessness of curious lovers who want to be told about every day of the past, every moment of separation. If only commentators, instead of fantasizing about what is written, would reconstruct what is missing and has to be completed by the effort of a faithful imagination.

Some trace must have been left. Volumes of the Prince's love sonnets lie in old antiquarian bookshops, and in the cellars of Elsinore his Wittenberg trunk has been moldering for ages; to students of Hamlet's prehistory it would have the same value as Priam's treasure to those searching for Troy.

Amid piles of papers and artifical flowers, a bundle of Ophelia's letters ("It's raining here. The sea is pounding so. Father has worries at the office. Laertes goes hunting. I'm alone all day. Yesterday I wept and father said I was impossible. But I'm not, I'm just very sad. When are you coming?" No style at all, right?). There's a costume, and the masks and props of Hamlet's amateur theatricals. Lecture notes, a Montaigne torn down the middle and held together with a ribbon, which if untied would lead to very intimate things. And an instrument with a broken string. On the bottom of the trunk, a treatise by the Prince entitled *Barbar's Syllogism and its Application to our Knowledge of Reality.* At that time Hamlet, like his friends, had succumbed to a superstitious rationalism and believed that people could avoid suffering and misfortune by applying the principles of logic.

Two impertinences and an announcement

HIS STOCKINGS FOULED, DOWN-GYVED to his ankle, the Prince wanders the galleries of Elsinore with an open book, an impotent dagger, and a wilting flower.

"But look where sadly the poor wretch comes reading."

The men hiding behind an arras hear his suppressed sighs and confused words. They see the Prince's figure moving along with unsteady step, dragging his shadow heavily behind

him. They see the black cloak slipping from his shoulders. Woe betide those who don't see anything beyond that, for whom a cloak and a shadow obscure the man.

In the most common judgment on Hamlet, he is a synonym for weakness, for a pathological inability to act, for hesitation. In the recesses of our superficial impressions wanders a boy dressed in black who escapes his tragic responsibility by playing the fool and the artist, playing the philosopher and the madman.

And for that matter, many scholarly commentaries have that thrust. The interpretation of Hamlet as a weakling is supported by quite a few august names. Apart from the arguments from authority there are also the arguments from quotation. Because our reverence for authorities is moderate and we know how easy it is to prove anything with quotations, we will reread the tragedy in its entirety. Against the common view that has killed him with the word "Hamletism," and against the commentators who, of the four humors ruling man's nature, see in him only phlegm and melancholy, let us try to give back the Prince his blood, bile, and grandeur.

Epilogue by Snuffed Lights

ONE OF THE REAL causes of our difficulties in understanding Hamlet is Shakespeare's own indeterminate relationship with that personage. It seems that the author was unable to maintain the proper distance, to be an objective chronicler of the hero's fate. Time and again it comes to dangerous liaisons, suspected collusion between Hamlet the Prince and Hamlet the Playwright.

The strongest and most intimate link between the poet and his hero is the known fact that both of them are artists. I hold to this thesis, even if those love sonnets the Prince wrote have not been found and even if it turned out that in student theater he played the role of prompter. Nor can the enthusiasm and expertise with which he received the actors at Elsinore be counted as sufficent proof that Hamlet was an artist. For that matter, his exchange with the actors is so obviously the author

speaking that it strikes us as a sudden turn from poetry to journalism. Nor will we be satisfied by that insertion of a dozen or so lines written by the Prince for *The Murder of Gonzago*. Where should we look for evidence of Hamlet's artistic attitude toward the world, the attitude which, taken wrongly, brings on the accusation of "Hamletizing"—understood as immersion in the sphere of the imagination?

We all know perfectly well that the performance of *The Murder of Gonzago* by the traveling troupe of actors is not only an entertainment for the melancholy Prince's diversion. We realize that it is a moment with a special weight, a turning point, and that after it the action takes its course on the other, falling slope of tragedy. We also sense that this crucial role being ascribed to *art* is to be read as a sign or symbol of more profound matters. Hamlet's intention is not particularly difficult to understand. The pantomime played by the actors is a dramatization of the Ghost's account, the alleged course of events in the murder of Hamlet's father by Claudius.

The Prince is counting on Claudius, present at the performance, to betray himself as the murderer. In this very Freudian fashion, Hamlet seeks to make sure that the Ghost commanding him to take revenge is not a delusory apparition from Hell.

But do these investigative motives play a decisive role here? It would seem that Hamlet is too thoroughly convinced Claudius is the villain to have to take recourse to such ingenious and, let us add, not entirely reliable methods of uncovering the truth. The pantomime is the first bloodless attack carried out in the world of imagination and ideal forms. It is an aesthetic revenge that Hamlet the artist has to taste first.

The extremely odd phenomenon—no longer merely psychological, or aesthetic, but somehow "meta"—that we leave the theater after a tragedy with a strong sense of spiritual uplift, Aristotle explains with reference to the cathartic function of the play, which rids the soul of painful emotions. Participating in the main characters' fate, we bear the burden of guilt with them, feel the lashes of punishment and the grace

of forgiveness. But if a murderer hiding in the darkness of the audience undergoes a cleansing, what is that play's "morality"? Let us assume instead that the play infuses them with an irresistible longing for true cleansing, with a will to good. If so, why does Claudius—a villain with a full moral consciousness, a villain who prays, who dreams of snow at night—why does Claudius not confess his crime in public right after the performance? Can it be that art—

With Shakespeare we search for the great power contained in works of art, the power that, liberated, raises up the fallen world and betters the moral order of reality. We seek art that, like religion, can throw us to our knees and raise us up again, absolved. But our searching arms remain empty.

Hamlet is a tragic artist, an artist who discovers that his art will not save the world.

The actors and audience have left the theater in a panic. Only the director and an initiated member of the audience remain in the empty hall among dwindling candles and discarded costumes: Hamlet and Horatio.

Let us not be deluded by the improvised verse and forced jollity of the two friends, for this epilogue by snuffed lights is heartbreakingly sad. The actors have taken off their masks, but the spectators are still wearing them.

The end of a certain hope, a certain dream of actors' slippers with a Provençal rose.

The Blood of Thought

THE MAD OPHELIA AND the mock-mad Hamlet express the poet's many-sided rebellion against the world's ordinariness. For there is a kind of normality that is unacceptable, a base, comfortable normality that submits to reality, forgets easily. It is universal because some inner law of economics doesn't allow us to experience reality to the full, to the depths, at the level of the most profound feelings and meanings. The same instinct for self-preservation in the sphere of the mind protects us from an excessive sensitivity, from the

ultimate why and wherefore. Hamlet is the contradiction of that attitude.

We invented his conjectural essay on the syllogism to bring out a conviction necessary to understanding of the character: the conviction that before the gates of Elsinore closed on him, he had a worldview of a sort, based on faith in the rational order inside man and outside him. He had his own system of values and a ladder perhaps not too high, but with solid rungs on which one could confidently put one's feet. Apart from indifferent concepts easily kneaded in the hand there were in that system nasty, hard concepts like death, crime, but a few measures could turn even those into bricks supporting a rational and attractive architecture. Man was one of the beings placed highest, tightly incorporated into the building's structure.

If it had not been for the tragic events that tore the Prince from the mood of study and contemplation, he might have been a bit of a Stoic, a bit of an Epicurean, a bit of an Aristotelian till the end of his life. His father's sudden death eluded all rational interpretation. It was a fact, *a thing that is*, a hard, rough object, naked and senseless. His whole artful system was shaken by this experience.

His second experience was the discovery of the crime. To the bitter truth of man's transience was added the truth about smiling villains, triumphant criminals. Unplumbed human nature opened up before the Prince like an abyss.

Hamlet—and this is a mark of intellectual greatness—rejected the acclaimed recipe of philosophy and did not tread the old path to Nature, by way of soothing indifference and endurance. The cruelty and wretchedness of man infected even nature. The earth seemed to him "a sterile promontory, the brave o'erhanging firmament a foul and pestilent congregation of vapours."

Before Descartes risked his universal doubt, before he began demolishing the foundations, he built himself a cozy little temporary morality not only to avoid hesitating to act when his reason obliged him to be hesitant to judge, but also to live as happily as he could in the midst of those intellectual

storms. The Prince of Denmark does not seek any protection. The current of his doubt is religious, metaphysical, moral, not merely methodological.

We meet Hamlet in a negative, skeptical phase. In this phase, definitions and theses are not important. There are situations in which a man should be able to do without a philosophy. There are experiences in the face of which one must discard systems of gentle persuasion and plausible consolations. Hamlet's greatness as a thinking being resides in his passion for blasting things away, in his nihilistic impetus, in the ardor of his negation, the bitterness of his skepticism.

Thinking is sometimes seen as a form of luxury in life, a narrow little puff of reflection trailing from the forehead. Down below the instincts, senses, and all the other condemned dark forces are seething. Thought is opposed to life as the only form of clarification and justification.

In Hamlet, thinking does not oppose itself to life or any other inner powers. He thinks with his whole life and with his whole person. The fingers touching Yorick's skull are the beginning of reflection; in Hamlet's conversation with his mother, thought weeps and bleeds.

What is sometimes interpreted as indecision, in the intellectual sphere as well, is in fact Hamlet's orientation toward the concrete, the thought form that is an immediate reaction to reality, a response to a situation. That is why the Prince's soliloquies, in which the dramatization of thought reaches its peak, are as thrilling as the action, if indeed not more engaging. They are woven so subtly of thought's material that you can listen to them with your eyes closed, even regretting that they are being spoken aloud. If the shallow trace left in one's consciousness by the recitation of a poem learned by heart or a reading from someone else's text can be called "*thought* thought," then thought that rips up a whole man, wholly absorbing him in the process, with a complete sense of responsibility and risk to the point of questioning himself—such thought may be called after a contemporary philosopher "*thinking* thought," fully and integrally connected to the subject. This heroic form of the intellect as it

experiences reality, despite its undulations, its rises and falls, has nothing in common with moodiness, differs from it in depth and authenticity.

Hamlet's madness is a veil behind which he prepares himself for the decisive trial. It is also battle: it liberates the strength of one driven into a corner—irony—and permits outbursts of sincerity and truth uninhibited by convention. But just as aesthetic revenge proved powerless, this ploy also lets him down and only makes the Prince reveal more of himself. Even such a capital calf as Polonius discovers the method in this madness, and Hamlet's main antagonist Claudius is fully aware of the mystification. Hamlet's gloomy joke, taking a stroll to a grave, his parables about man as pipe and as sponge, that Pascalian paragraph from the words "What a piece of work is a man…" to "But to me what is this quintessence of dust?"—all of them make an all too profound sense. It is not healthy common sense but an obsessive thickened form of thought, and for that reason the scenes of performative madness are closest to the soliloquies. The famous soliloquy on the risk of suicide (to be or not to be), cut off by Ophelia's entrance, turns into an explosive dialogue that despite glaringly obvious difference of tone and an intensified level of cruelty, has the same foundation, the same material of thought and even a consistently arrived at conclusion.

The truly mad Ophelia and the mock-mad Hamlet cross the garden (murderers say there are snakes in it). The Prince watches closely and tensely listens to her words. Ophelia's eyes are changed, wide, burning, her breath is quickened, she hums a song she would never have dared to sing before. Seeing all this, Hamlet thinks of a philosophy as powerful and authentic as madness.

Greatness

"AN OAK PLANTED IN[2] a precious vase that could only hold frail flowers, the oak's roots push; the vase breaks. A beautiful, noble, highly moral being who does not have the

inner strength that makes a hero, perishes under the weight he can neither carry nor throw off."

According to Goethe, this precious vase is Hamlet. This whole unnatural comparison gave rise to the quite natural and generally accepted interpretation according to which the Prince "twists and turns, frets and worries, steps forward and immediately retreats." Pondering the sources of this interpretation we arrive at the conviction that it was an attempt to look at the hero from the point of view of the whole work, whose perfection was assumed from the start; second, it was about Hamlet not "in himself" but the role of the actor performing the character; and finally, such a personal tone crept into Goethe's explanation that it threw a shadow on the disinterestedness of his research aims.

Goethe was under the powerful spell of Shakespearean tragedy, but he couldn't fail to notice the significant flaws in the play's structure, the elaboration of superfluous themes, the fading dramatic line, and so on. How can a work built so imperfectly make such an impression? Was the person of the hero so fascinating that his elusive "charm" made up for the faults of the whole? The interpreter got caught up in a false antinomy between the main character and the artistic construction of the whole. It seemed to him that to save the consistency of the play's structure, and thus Shakespeare's greatness as a playwright, he should make the hero guilty of any defects in the work. Plot lines are cut off and the action is broken up because Hamlet hesitates, is indecisive, "hamletizes."

The other consideration which inclined him toward that interpretation was practical through and through: Goethe wanted to give actors the key to the role, tell them how they should play Hamlet. This practical question replaces the more difficult and perhaps more theoretical one of who Hamlet really was. Showing the mechanics of melancholy gestures, the tones of indecision, the unsteady steps and sighs is relatively easy. But suggesting the human double bottom of Hamlet, as Olivier did, allowing people to feel his entirely consistent and courageous character beyond words and gestures—that is the deep understanding and personal

sensitivity of the performer, not a costume that can be fitted and passed on to others at will. The truth of the Hamlet who does not hamletize is an unpractical and difficult truth.

In the end our suspicion of Goethe's personal investment derives from the thought that he put across Hamlet as a Romantic figure, a close relative of Lotte's unhappy adorer. Meanwhile, the comparison with Werther allows us to grasp Hamlet in the perspective of greatness. The sentimental gesture of a young hysteric clashes with Hamlet's profound drama and shows the incommensurability of the two characters and their spiritual formation. One can sympathize with Werther, but one can't feel a deep solidarity such as binds us to Hamlet. The Romantic drowned in tears and infinity does not once achieve the high tone of Hamletian pathos. Even the letter to his beloved before he dies is less of an envoy to human beings than are the Prince's soliloquies. We feel strongly which of the two most fully and worthily represents humanity. I think that if they ever met in the other world, it would immediately come to a scene as violent as the fight of Hamlet and Laertes by Ophelia's grave. In any case, Werther covered up a not entirely admirable detail of Goethe's life and compensated him for it. Hamlet's moral climate and his mood of responsibility indicate that Shakespeare did not write him to justify or stylize himself for anybody's benefit.

Orestes is often compared to the Danish prince. The comparison is interesting not as an analogy but as a contrast. Orestes is a naïve Hamlet. The sword he sinks into the bodies of his mother and her lover has the simplicity of an elemental force. Not until after the deed do thought and conscience catch up with the revenger. Hamlet withdraws and fulfills himself in his act completely because he has traveled a long path from the moment when he realizes "fate cries out" to him, going to meet the Ghost, right up to the words "Readiness is all," when he decides on the duel. In the bracket of those two phrases are contained *his choice and conscious destiny*.

In deciding on the role of avenger, Hamlet makes a great choice. A great choice is always an abstract choice. Its meaning and authenticity are fulfilled by a whole sequence of concrete choices made every moment. The pain of the

Hamletian dialectic of "I and the universe" is verified not only in the distant stars but in every stone stumbled over by those who seek. Hamlet feels this on every plane of reality, in his relation to every person. His choice must be cruel and synonymous with a rejection of love, friends, Ophelia, his mother. And the Prince is more and more alone (Horatio is drawn with such a faint line that he in no way disturbs this solitude), until in the end he is left alone with his fate.

Fate is an inexorable alien force that can neither be drawn into a pact or crushed. So heroes rebel and fight. Hamlet belongs to the righteous who do not shake their fists at heaven but grow into their fate. When he finally touches it with his mind and heart, when he accepts it inwardly, it ceases to be violence and becomes a hero's strength. In the final scene Hamlet is strong and when he chooses his weapon before the duel, he stands above all the blind forces of the universe.

Moral greatness manifests itself in a particular tone, used in the telling by one who has encountered it. When the lights of the procession fall on the sharp profile of the Prince lying prone, we lean over him.

We vow to you, Prince, buried in an interval in the roar of guns and in our silence: sleeplessness, disquiet, ardor. We vow to you, Prince, buried in a small gap in the earth and in the deepest site of memory, that when the time of trial comes, we will choose the sharper rapier and the more difficult death.

1951

REQUEST[1]

PIETER BRUEGHEL, GOOD Pieter Brueghel: paint a little town, beginning with steep roofs laid out in warm shingles like a crust of homemade bread. An amorous bumblebee tries in vain to get under those roofs, but on the way it gets stuck in a heart-shaped opening in the shutters.

Let the streets be crooked, the walls yellow, the window-sills blue, the window panes like almonds, O let them be as if they were the first to see the sunset.

And now, since we have everything, even a church tower, where a bell blossoms covered with mosses and a powdery green sheen, now it is time to think about the townspeople. Take a crowd in your hands: children shrieking like white mice, women with angular elbows and ugly ears, peasants with drunkards' faces, fathers with venerable purple noses. Then a few clowns, rope-dancers, trollops, a beggar with a bloody mug and a cripple with a blind face like a lily. Gather them all and before you let them out into the street, jumble them up in your hands for a while like dice and make sure they look like they're in a hurry. One with a goose to market, one with a dagger in his sleeve to carve up a rich uncle, one to the astrologer who reads the stars at night and brews beer by day, and the mayor simply to his wife for supper. And show them so that the mayor's step is as important as the slow trot of the dog escaping with a stolen bone (and for God's sake, Pieter Brueghel, don't forget the dog's tail, which should be curling, as that dog—despite his poor material circumstances—has an even-tempered, gentle character and is the only philosopher in a radius of seven miles).

Let the town be called Haarlem. Well, now we can live in it, but that's not all, a landscape must be set in swinging

motion like water, far away, very far away, and mountains transparent as blue rock must rise. On the highest peak, a castle like a comb about to slide out from a head of hair, and above it a green, sour sky, and oh, trees too, of course, how can there be a landscape without trees, each branch calligraphed on the sheet of sky laid under it, each leaf clear as in a herbarium.

Between the trees two thrushes fly—no, not fly but hang suspended, and if they moved even a feather, this whole world would collapse.

On the nearest tree, on the highest tree, a dry pod, an unripe fruit: a hanged man. In life he was quite morose, but now he's laughing his head off while the wind, a gay wind, caresses his heels.

1952

LEONARDO'S DISQUIET[1]

I THINK HE OFTEN repeated to himself the phrase "O Leonardo, why do you labor so?"—he who was able to look at himself from the perspective of "frozen time."

It appears the whole restless labor of his life was overcome by a pure and controlled art. And yet his painting is filled with disquiet.

Leonardo's disquiet—what do you mean? Haven't his paintings been punctured with compasses, covered with networks of lines to prove the geometrical wisdom of his compositions, the balance of the spatial forms and the quietude of the isoceles triangles? Michelangelo is a different story, but Leonardo seems to dwell in the very self-enchanted and self-satisfied heart of the Renaissance. And yet his painting is filled with disquiet.

Leda, the Gioconda, Benci[2], angels and women, goddesses and Madonnas; do you understand their smiles and the look in their widely set eyes? And the rocks, plants, and trees, the cold green waters, streams, and air—(how strangely he painted the early evening air).

So many questions, so many mysteries, or if that term irritates your reason—so many problems. And though it is a

wise and self-conscious art, his painting is filled with disquiet.

LEONARDO THE PAINTER WAS the first to strive for a liberation of the arts. He dared to demand comparisons of painting with the other arts. With the zeal of one who reviles an age-old wrong, he raised painting above poetry. His argument was naïve: the eye is a nobler sense than the ear; and the next argument, a little more substantial: the superiority of the image of nature to its description, of form to expression.

But trampling on poetry wasn't enough for him. He wrote of the superiority of painting to philosophy. And because the artist is a pupil of nature, he stands next to the student of nature. You see yourselves what going beyond your own discipline leads to.

Leonardo wanted to contain in his paintings the moods and emotions of poetry, the wisdom of science and philosophy. He, who warned himself that "one should not desire the impossible," it seems, desired it above all things. He is the Great Usurper.

Looking at the paintings of Watteau, Chardin, Renoir, you see that they possess the same beauty of surface, the same tranquillity, the same grace of color. Leonardo knew too much for a painter. It seems that painting his beautiful heads, he couldn't free himself from the thought of the skull, the brain, the network of veins, of everything he learned from the autopsy of corpses. Shouldn't a painter know only the skin of the world? At every step, Leonardo the painter was ambushed by Leonardo the anatomist. And hence the sad wisdom and the melancholy of knowledge in his paintings.

Among his writings there is a fragment that seems not only an excellent introduction to the *Madonna of the Rocks* but also a commentary on his whole art:

"…often lost amid shadowy rocks, I came to discover a great cave, before which I, standing, somewhat astonished and unknowing of such things, with my back bent in an arch and my weary hand leaning on one knee, I covered my lowered and half-closed eyelids with my right hand.

"And when I stood there a moment, leaning here and there to see whether there were not something hidden from me by the great darkness reigning inside the cave, suddenly two forces awoke in me, fear and desire; fear of the terrifying dark cave, and desire to look if there was some extraordinary thing inside."

Let us repeat: fear and desire. That is the formula for Leonardo's disquiet.

The peculiarity of Leonardo's disquiet is that it does not manifest itself in violent gestures. It is disquiet that respects the line, disquiet controlled and therefore doubly disquieting. How great is it and how great is he who mastered it.

And one more thing: "if there was some extraordinary thing"—is written by the same man who said "every thing derives from every thing, every thing becomes every thing, every thing returns to every thing," the man who wrote a treatise on the elements and wanted to catch nature in a net of causes. Fear and desire of an extraordinary thing.

O Leonardo, what do you so infinitely desire?

1952

GUINEA PIG, OR ON THE POWER OF REASON

FOUR GENTLEMEN WERE sitting in the garden of a small café, talking about the power of knowledge. Three of them represented the humanities. The fourth was drinking his third cup of tea in a row without speaking.

"Whenever I think about these things," said a plump little linguist, "I remember a story from the more remote days of my youth. With your permission, I'll give you a brief account."

The gentlemen nodded, all except for the mathematician, who was stirring sugar into his tea and was entirely caught up in that action.

"Well, it was at the time when I was studying at the university, before the first war. I was friends with a young and extraordinarily talented doctor. In the period I'm going to tell you about he was working on his PhD. He had sent his wife and little daughter to stay with her parents in the countryside so he could have some peace.

"My friend had one peculiarity: he was pathologically incapable of solitude. On the day after his family had left he came to me in despair, asking me to move in with him: "I really can't bear silence in the house," he confessed ashamedly. Of course I agreed.

"After a few days he appeared with a cage. There were guinea pigs in the cage. They're the most wonderful creatures under the sun, believe me, gentlemen, not cats, not dogs, but guinea-pigs. I was appointed stable-boy. I prepared them a mixture of beets and carrots, I refreshed their litter—all to touch their warm fur and hold them tightly enough to feel their hearts beating. But the fun didn't last for long. Three days later

my friend said solemnly: “Now we begin the experiment. My career depends on this. I count on your help.”

This was a lot less fun. I was supposed to catch my charges by their silly little legs, turn them on their backs and hold them down firmly while my friend’s needle administered death.

“Are they all going to die?” I asked.

“All of them,” he replied. “I infected them with tuberculosis, and now I’m going to cure them. We’ll inject them with a medication in use today; I want to demonstrate its complete inefficacy. They’ll get different doses of the medication and they’ll die at different times. That’s important for the experiment too.”

The guinea-pigs sank into despondency. They stopped singing, their fur turned bristly. They sat in a corner, breathing with difficulty. Their little heads hung on the ground—apart, somehow. Every two hours they were given a dose of the medication. The next day a period of revival followed. They began to eat a little. Heartened, I ran to get the freshest new lettuce. But my friend dampened my spirits.

“The improvement is an illusion, now death will come irrevocably. I give them 48 hours at most.”

And indeed one after another they started to tremble and fall on their sides like toppled toys. My friend recorded his observations in a notebook, and I lifted out the still warm bodies and carried them to the freezer.

In the end only one guinea-pig was left, white with little red eyes, bristly like the others. I now never left the cage for a minute, as I was supposed to report the exact time of its death. After an hour, pushing with her paralyzed legs, she crawled to the edge of the cage, and reached out her dry hot little nose to me. “She’s saying good-bye,” I thought sentimentally. I put a dish of water under her nose without any conviction. She drank it. And another one. We went to sleep certain we would find her dead in the morning.

The first voice to reach me when I woke up was the high, piercing song of my white guinea-pig. I jumped out of bed and

ran over to her. She was alive. She was scuttling around the cage digging out bits of carrot from the straw. I immediately prepared her a breakfast fit for a queen.

My friend, on the other hand, didn't eat any breakfast and called the clinic to say he wasn't coming in. He sat down to make calculations and I helped him. This experiment was just a control; the phenomenon had been studied previously in a large number of cases. We began by checking the protocols and initial reckonings. We found an error right at the beginning. We had to draw up new rows of figures. Naturally, mean and standard deviation underwent certain changes. We worked for many hours stubbornly, without rest. From time to time we heard the guinea-pig's chirping. Now you understand, gentlemen, that to each of us that voice meant something completely different. And I could not find it in myself to feel solidarity with my friend. Solidarity with life is a primal feeling. At the end my friend prophesied: "Taking our corrections into account, my hypothesis stands. The guinea-pig must die. The error didn't exceed the acceptable margin of error."

We went over to the cage. The guinea-pig was turned over on her side like a toy. And that head was lying there, apart, somehow."

Although this was only the death of a guinea-pig, the gentlemen listening were silent, and only after a moment did one of them say:

"The finest thing in that story is your friend's faith. The young man believed in his realistic vision in the face of the facts. That's how science is done," he added, with irony.

"I'm struck by the fact that the death of that rogue guinea-pig came at the moment when the calculation error had been corrected," said another. "At that moment the necessity of death had been proven."

A third remarked: "Say what you like: for me as a humanist this story is optimistic, after all. I would entitle it: The Guinea-Pig, or That Life Cannot Be Weighed."

Here the mathematician spoke up:

“For me, my friends, there is nothing irrational or mysterious about this. Of course it’s hard to determine causes in a case described in literary form. I suspect that here—as often happens in bacteriology—the law of small probabilities was at work. Poisson’s model, in particular, if applied to the calculations, might explain a lot. Perhaps you can remember whether your friend used the Poisson model[1]?”

The linguist couldn’t remember. On the whole he thought the question made no sense at all.

1956

A BITTER ROSE PETAL

WHEN SALOMON ANKER came home from the camp, people wouldn't let him pass. They crowded around him in a circle. Salomon leaned against the wall and told them what went on behind the barbed wire. He was often invited to people's homes; he sat in the kitchen or the sitting room surrounded by faces open with curiosity, drank milk diluted with water and told his stories again. Just like a merchant returning from distant parts.

At the beginning people listened, full of horror and shame that a man was able to endure so much. Later with profound understanding and knowledge. It was enough to say: "Hermann Goeth[1]," and there was no need to add: "camp commander at Kamienna[3]," because people knew from the papers about what he'd done and his death by hanging. Until one day they stopped listening altogether. They buried their dead and returned to their spinning-wheels. Once again, life turned out to be stronger than memory. Photos in stripes were no longer valued. On the bank of the thundering elements stood Salomon—a useless old Jew kept by his daughter Fryda.

Fryda patched up worn out shirts and turned ragged collars. It was thanks to those collars that I met Salomon. I choose one of his stories. It's the story about Róża. It isn't typical or even the most horrifying. I can't explain why I chose it above the others.

"She had hair like gold. And generally, she was gorgeous. She didn't look Jewish at all. She had Aryan papers, but she was caught by some accident. I don't know whether she knew Edek Mendelewicz before that. Maybe they met in the camp.

At first both of them got light work, cutting wood in the forest. You could tell the ones who worked in the forest from the ones in the workshops right away. The ones from the forest looked better, and it's not true that the fleas bit them more. Fleas are equitable, they bite everybody the same. Everyone envied the forest workers.

Every couple of weeks the Germans performed a selection. They picked out the ones in the worst shape from the workshops and transported them to Krępielna. That was a place in the forest enclosed by a fence made of mats and paper. On three sides there were signs reading: "Das Betreten dieses Platzes ist unter Todesstrafe untersagt[2]." You heard shots coming from there.

It seemed for the time being that neither Róża nor Mendelewicz would ever go there. Until once at roll-call von Hecht was doing the review. We all know what that meant: he was selecting people for Werk C, where the worst work was with grenades, picric acid, and TNT. Hecht had his eye on Róża from the start and so he picked her, not Mendelewicz who was big and strong.

Werk C was deep into the forest and separated from the rest. The workers there had a separate barracks.

Three weeks later Róża came to see Mendelewicz. It's hard even to say it was Róża. This was an emaciated creature in a paper cape tied up with wire. She was yellow, like all the picric workers, and her hair was red—not ruddy, but red as poppies. Her nails were broken and her arms were covered with sores. And all that wasn't even so bad—the worst was the smell. A terrible acridity came off her. It was winter so she sat down by the stove. Within a minute it had become unbearable. The bitter smell, so bitter, the whole air smelled foul. We made a sign to Mendelewicz to get her out of there. Somebody gave her a few potato peelings for on the way.

"You, Mendelewicz," said the Stubeältester when he came back—"don't bring your canary in here anymore. She's not fit for human company. Picrics live on their own. That's the law."

Voices went up to say that even the bread turned bitter after Róża had been there, it would have to be thrown out.

Mendelewicz didn't say anything, didn't defend her. Three weeks later (we were free every three weeks) he went to see her himself. He came back very quickly. He vomited all night.

That was already near the end, but even so the Germans were making various improvements. There was no shooting at Krępgielna anymore, and on the camp road there was now a kind of transport: a small car with four SS officers, a truck with 30 guards, sitting as if cut from cardboard, and bringing up the rear, the strangest vehicle. It looked like a circus or gypsy wagon, only much bigger, with a car's bonnet stuck to the front. There was a tiny barred window high up and a chimney on the roof, or really just a big pipe like the one off a cast-iron stove. You heard cries coming from that wagon. The whole transport went to Krępgielna. At night a huge red-blue flame flared up there.

You can't really say that Mendelewicz helped Róża. He split every ration he got in two and hid it in a bag. But he didn't go to her himself, he sent someone else. It always cost him something but he could afford it. Because he was stronger than the others he made extra money doing various jobs.

When Róża fell ill with typhus no one wanted to go to her. Typhus was more terrifying than Goeth, von Hecht and all the guards put together. Then I said I'd go. I felt sorry for Róża, and I also needed that bread that Mendelewicz paid for carrying her food. I was sick with hunger and I'd already sold everything I had, down to my last tooth.

She was lying in the hospital barracks on a bare plank-bed, covered with paper. They didn't give picric workers blankets because they stained them yellow. She hadn't been to work in two weeks and she still smelled that way. She had a high fever but she was conscious.

Tell me, Salomon, you're such a good man—will I get rid of this hair, and will my skin be white again, when we are liberated?

I got angry. She looked half dead and she was worried about things like that. I left her the bread and a kind word. Before I'd closed the hospital barracks door the woman lying next to her had stolen the bread.

When one of the sick died they threw the body in a container between the barracks and the latrine. That's where they threw Róża. Every couple of days the bodies were loaded on a car. That was an extra job. Whoever wanted to could do it and you got a crust of bread for it. Mendelewicz made extra money that way.

After Róża died we thought he wouldn't do that work anymore. But he did. Maybe he wanted to see her for the last time, or put her on the car himself. I don't know. I only know he didn't have to share with anyone the bread crust he got for it and for the first time he ate it all.

1956

VAN GOGH'S SAD POPULARITY

A FEW YEARS AGO, visiting Provence, I stopped off in St. Rémy. I went to the ancient monastery of St. Paul-de-Mausole to see the place where Van Gogh lived in the year before his death. An elderly nun whom I asked to show me the painter's cell became indignant: "There's nothing to look at. You'd do better to pray for Van Gogh, that unfortunate man, who weeps eternally."

Later I saw his big retrospective in the Jacquemart-André Museum. You had to stand an hour in a long line of pious followers who had made pilgrimages from the four corners of the earth to touch the martyr's relics.

The recent exhibition in the National Museum in Warsaw broke all national records for popularity. School groups wend their way across the crowded rooms, listening to a commentary thickly strewn with remarks on the painter's unhappy life. I do not think, however, that this belated honor by the public is quite sincere. There is too much sensationalism and snobbery in it, too little authentic acceptance. For the majority the art of Van Gogh is an unacceptable art just as it was 70 years ago. And it doesn't look as if even the wildest avantgarde of the future will be able to assimilate it.

I don't want to pretend that I belong to a select group of initiates. I have seen many of Van Gogh's paintings, but every encounter with this painter plunges me further into helplessness. I suspect there are no initiates to this master's work. They are surely not the novelists who track his unhappy loves, nor the gentlemen in white suits who speak of psychomotoric epilepsy, nor the art historians who explain that his beloved sower motif signifies an "almost smiling" death

walking “in the bright light of day, in a sun illuminating everything with a radiance as pure as gold.”

It seems to me that a comparison of Van Gogh and Cézanne is fruitful, not on the basis of similarity of course, but of contrast. Cézanne, realizing his program with an iron consistency, is a classic, a great analyst of form, a painter whose anatomical vision should be taught in art academies to this day. The other is a Romantic, a Dionysian artist, a visionary running across the fields like Saint Francis shouting: Love, love. You can be a good painter if you study Cézanne’s lesson. Whoever dares to copy Van Gogh falls inevitably into the hell of imitators. For this painter didn’t care about masterpieces, or even good paintings (an example from the last exhibition: *Willows at Sunset*) but about what is beyond all painting, beyond all art.

The exhibition in the National Museum, based mainly on the collections in the Kröller-Muller Museum, is the first Polish presentation of Van Gogh worthy of the name. For this we owe the organizers a debt of gratitude. For the first time we can trace all the phases in the artist’s development, from his first childish drawings to his last canvas. The exhibition very suggestively shows the Dutch roots of Van Gogh’s painting, which is a counterbalance to the prevailing views on the decisive influence on this artist of Japanese art and Impressionism.

Van Gogh remained faithful to Rembrandt’s country even in his best French period, even under the burning sun of Provence. It’s true that *Three Bird’s-nests* of 1885 is black as pitch in comparison with the *Field of Wheat* of four years later, with its sower melting in the sun. But the battle of darkness and light, the searing drama of red and yellow is fought in the painter’s consciousness up to the very last moments of his life.

In June 1890, a month before his death, he writes to his brother: “…I’m now working in a field of lucerne full of poppies.” It is worthwhile to compare this *Field of Poppies* with the well-known painting by Monet—the French painter’s frothy and terribly superficial joy in colors with the Great

Dutchman's severe, subdued study, no longer of nature but of reality.

1962

WHY THE CLASSICS[1]

I CHOSE THIS POEM[*] after some hesitation. I do not consider it the best poem I've written, nor is it one that can represent my poetic program. I think it does have two virtues: it is simple, dry, and it speaks of matters that are truly close to my heart, without superfluous ornament or stylization.

The poem has a three-part structure. In the first part, it speaks of an event taken from the work of a classical author. It is, as it were, a note on my reading. In the second part I transfer the event to contemporary times to elicit a tension, a clash, to reveal an essential difference in attitude and behavior. Finally, the third part contains a conclusion or moral, and also transposes the problem from the sphere of history to the sphere of art.

You don't have to be a great expert on contemporary literature to notice its characteristic feature—the eruption of despair and unbelief. All the fundamental values of European culture have been drawn into question. Thousands of novels, plays, and epic poems speak of an inevitable annihilation, of life's meaninglessness, the absurdity of human existence.

I don't mean to subject pessimism to easy ridicule if it is a response to evil in the world. However, I think that the black tone of contemporary literature has its source in the attitude its writers take to reality. And that is what I tried to attack in my poem.

The Romantic view of the poet who bares his wounds, relates his own misfortunes, still has many supporters today, despite changes in style and literary taste. It is universally held that the artist has a sacred right to ostentatious subjectivism, to a display of the tender "I."

If a school of literature existed, one of its basic exercises should be the description not of dreams but of objects. Beyond the artist's reach, a world unfolds—difficult, dark, but real. One should not lose the faith that it can be captured in words, that justice can be rendered it.

Very early on, near the beginning of my writing life, I came to believe that I had to seize on some object outside of literature. Writing as a stylistic exercise seemed barren to me. Poetry as the art of the word made me yawn. I also understood that I couldn't sustain myself very long on the poems of others. I had to go out from myself and literature, look around in the world and lay hold of other spheres of reality.

Philosophy gave me the courage to ask primary questions, fundamental, basic questions: does the world exist, what is its essence, and can it be known? If this discipline can be made useful to poetry it is not by translating systems but by recreating the drama of thought.

I do not turn to history to draw from it an easy lesson of hope, but to confront my experience with that of others, to acquire something I might call universal compassion, and also a sense of responsibility, responsibility for the state of my conscience.

It is an old dream of poets that their work may become a concrete object like a stone or a tree, that what they make from the material of language—itself subject to constant change—may acquire a lasting existence. One of the ways to achieve this, it seems to me, is to cast it far away from oneself, to erase the ties that connect it to its creator. This is how I understand Flaubert's recommendation: "The artist must be in his work as God is in nature."

1966?

TO DESCRIBE REALITY[1]

I FEEL AN INWARD panic coming on when I imagine I'm walking down the street in Periclean Athens (we all have our favorite historical period) and bump into—guess who—Socrates, who grabs me by the arm and begins, cunningly, as follows:

"Hello! It's good I ran into you. Yesterday some friends and I were talking about poetry: what its nature is and whether it speaks the truth or lies. But none of us, neither Sophro, nor Crito, nor even Plato, writes poetry. But you do, and you're even praised for it, so you must have knowledge of what poetry is."

I now know the game's up for me. We are surrounded by a thick crowd of onlookers. I share the fate of general Laches, who could not give a definition of courage, and Polos the sophist, who knows nothing about rhetoric, and the priest Euthyphro, who has nothing very intelligent to say about piety.

It will probably end like this: I will slink off in shame, pursued by laughter, the dialectician's voice ringing in my ears:

"How is it that you go off, leaving us in dark ignorance, you, you the one who could enlighten us? You carry your secret away with you and you'll just go on pulling the wool over our ears with your sorcerer's words. But we don't know whether to yield to your charms or defend ourselves from them."

With all my admiration for the great Athenian, it always seemed to me that in his dialogues, in the manner he conducted them, there is a certain amount of intellectual blackmail; for surely one can be courageous while not being

able to give a definition of courage, and one can write pretty good poems while being a frankly miserable theoretician.

The language of poetry—a non-discursive process, a method of using images, metaphors, parables, an oscillation between what is clear and what is only sensed intuitively—itself offers arguments for its defense.

I am convinced that poetry in all its ambitious attempts strives to touch reality. It does so by other paths than science and it should not yield too much to the pressures of our all-too-rational age.

Technocrats prophesy the end of poetry. Cyberneticists say that its content is "noise," that is, devoid of information. What will the poet be in the coming age? A shaman festooned with amulets? One who summons the old myths of humanity? Or perhaps a jester at the court of science?

I read the reports of the Rand Corporation. This is an organization of American scientists, a little like a brain collective, concerned among other things with predicting scientific progress. From these documents we learn that in the course of the coming sixty years we will be using animals like monkeys, whose intelligence will develop to the extent that they will be able to occupy the place of unskilled workers; human life will become longer as a result of control of the chemical processes of aging; apart from space travel, we will be able to make journeys through time by freezing bodies and bringing organisms into a state of prolonged death throes.

A characteristic mark of the report is that it identifies human progress with scientific progress (the myth of the twentieth century) and places history outside the brackets of its consideration. As if the dull march of barbarians had never yet erased or exploded the radiant visions of reason.

My gymnasium instructors drummed it into us that "historia magistra vitae." But when history appeared in all its barbarous magnificence—as a real incandescence over my city—I understood that it makes a peculiar teacher. Those who lived through it consciously, with all that followed it, have more food for thought than readers of ancient chronicles. It is

clotted and murky material. It requires the work of many consciences to illuminate it.

The medieval French astrologist Nicolas Flamel[2] once saw an angel in a dream holding an open book containing knowledge of the universe, man, and the future. Nicolas Flamel's pilgrimage to the book he dreamed would take twenty-four years, only then could he open it.

Humanity will never abandon the dream of a sign, an incantation, a formula that will illuminate the meaning of life. The need for a canon, for criteria allowing us to distinguish evil from good, for a clear set of values—is presently as strong as ever.

When our fathers and grandfathers were asked about eternal values, their thoughts invariably turned to antiquity. Human dignity, gravity, objectivism radiated from the writings of the classics.

But for the ancient authors and lovers of antiquity, Greece and Rome were a little like happy isles where virtue, harmony, and balance flowered under the sun of reason. Winckelmann's[3] formula "edle Einfalt und stille Grösse" long held sway over our minds. Greek statues came to us cleansed by rains, stripped of the colors of life, pure as Platonic ideas. A deepening historical perspective has opened our eyes to the dark periods.

My philosophy professor, who taught the wisdom of the Greeks, infused us with enthusiasm for the Stoics. At the time that was going on, *amor fati* saved us from madness. We read Epictetus, Marcus Aurelius, and trained ourselves in the difficult art of *ataraxia* (ἀταραξία), driving all agitation and passion from our souls. Living in accordance with nature, that is, with reason, in a world gone mad, amid shrieks of hatred, was a difficult experience.

Some critics with an overly optimistic attitude to the world accuse me of pessimism. This has always seemed to me a misunderstanding. Even if a dark tone prevails in a poet's work, it doesn't mean that the author means to scoff at the

world's imperfection and add his lament to the sum of real misfortune, increasing the despair.

Similarly, irony is not cynicism but a bashfulness of feeling. What on the surface seems pessimistic is in fact a stifled call for the good, for the increase of the good, for the opening of the conscience.

And it is certainly not a coincidence that authors of joyful odes have always hung around the courts of tyrants.

A dialogue with the past, harkening to the voices of the departed, touching stones that bear the half-erased inscriptions of ancient destinies, summoning shades to nourish themselves on our compassion…

A taste for the past can, but need not, signify a flight from the now, from disillusionment. For if we set out on our travels through time carrying the full burden of our experience, if we penetrate myths, symbols, and legends in order to extract from them what is alive, then surely we cannot deny that these doings require an active stance.

Paracelsus said that God's creation was unfinished, and that man was summoned to finish the work of creation. That is a very beautiful declaration of humanism.

A sense of the fragility and transience of human life may be less oppressive if placed in a historical chain of events that are a transmission of faith in the purposefulness of efforts and strivings. Then even anxiety will be nothing but a call for hope.

1966

MONSIEUR MONTAIGNE'S VOYAGE TO ITALY

Il est bon de voyager quelquefois; cela étend les idées, et rabat l'amour-propre.[1]

SAINT-BEUVE

WHEN ONE HAS just enough strength left to shift the pillow under one's head, it will be time to write a work, a book, not a collection of essays, with the title *Introduction to the Theory of Travel.* To limit the vast topic one should abjure the description of many sorts of voyage and concentrate on the noblest genre, which the Germans call *Bildungsreise*, a pilgrimage to holy sites of culture.

It occurred to me that by analyzing travelers' accounts from the Renaissance, say to the nineteenth century (even taking into account only descriptions of Italy), we would gain interesting material on the artistic sensitivities of representatives of various ages, on changes in taste, aesthetic canons, the dawn and dusk of masterpieces.

From the rich literature on the subject I chose to start with Montaigne's *Voyage en Italie*, in the hope that this book by that marvelous writer and typical representative of his time would bring together everything that Italy and its art meant to a man of the Renaissance.

The manuscript was discovered late (in 1774) and by accident, by a canon looking for material for a history of the Périgueux in an old trunk in the castle of Montaigne. It is not among the works of his that are well-known and read. The

manuscript, written in the hand of the author of the *Essays* and his secretary, is consigned to the margins of Montaigne's work. It is not styled in literary fashion (and was probably never intended for publication), but is on the other hand a sincere travel journal. This curious book made an immediate impression on me, as I didn't find in it what I expected—and drew me in the further I read in it.

It will be no indiscretion to say that Montaigne's reason for traveling was not exclusively curiosity about the world, his *humeur avide des choses nouvelles*[2], but a physical ailment—kidney stones. The Tuscan town of Villa near Lucca was famous for its curative waters. Montaigne, who had no patience with doctors and like the Romans loved waters (and therefore Nature), set off on July 22, 1580, to regain his health. He naturally took advantage of the occasion—as we would say now, although then it meant an additional journey—to visit Rome, the destination and dream of every humanist. For Montaigne this was particularly important. After all, he had written of himself that his mother tongue was Latin and that he had come to know about the affairs of Rome before he knew those of his own house. On the way back from the Eternal City he headed for the village Loretto, famous for its miracles. Villa and Loretto—a touching symbol of double indemnity.

Montaigne's book is not a guidebook to monuments. Instead, descriptions of inns and gastronomical problems occupy a prominent place in it. It is a remarkable thing that, at the height of the Renaissance, one of that age's great writers shows so little interest in matters of art. We find only one painter's name in the pages of his diary. During a visit to Pisa, Montaigne mentions the frescoes "d'un Gondi de Florence" (this is probably the scrambled name of Taddeo Gaddi).

It is difficult to determine whether it is an accident or the consequence of the author's personal aesthetic inclinations, but the fact is that Montaigne lavished much more attention on sculpture. In the church of San Lorenzo he notes Michelangelo's sculptures and finds them excellent. He visits the Villa d'Este in Tivoli and gives a list of a dozen or so sculptures that especially interest him, without attempting a detailed description. Recognized masterpieces of antiquity

figure on this list: the *Laocoön, Antinous*, the *Belvedere Apollo*, the *Wolverine*, the *Boy Extracting a Thorn from his Foot*. Among contemporary sculptures, Montaigne's preference again goes to Michelangelo.

In architecture the author of the *Essays* admires not proportions, style, or any aesthetic values, but size, singularity, and technical perfection. That is why he likes the leaning tower of Pisa, the Palazzo della Ragione in Padua, because its largest hall is unsupported by columns, and the palace of Urbino, because it has as many rooms as there are days in a year. Nevertheless he devotes most of his attention to religious architecture, writing quite laconically that he liked such-and-such a church best. But generally he likes Italian churches, especially Roman churches, less than German or French churches. The task of religious architecture—as a reading of this traveler's journal suggests—is not to inspire awe but a religious frame of mind.

To the landscape Montaigne takes the same pragmatic—not aesthetic—attitude. We find in him neither descriptions of mountains nor the sylvan wilderness so beloved of the Romantics. Montaigne's tastes are in complete harmony with the ancients, who adored an inhabited landscape with the soothing view of vineyards and cultivated fields. Untamed nature aroused terror. In Montaigne's time, the equilibrium between the virgin earth and civilization had not yet been disturbed.

However, it is the antiquities of Rome that made the greatest impression on Montaigne. The author of the *Essays,* who spends so much attention during his journey on meals and the cleanliness of bedclothes, falls into a truly poetic and exalted mood at the sight of the Forum. His sobriety, formed by ancient authors (Montaigne often resembles a Renaissance Pliny), does not allow him to melt into sentimental raptures. He studies the topography of the Forum like an archaeologist and is amazed that so many buildings of traditions known from ancient texts fit into such a small area. (This is the characteristic incommensurability of the imagination with what we see with our own eyes, experienced by anyone who comes into contact with places brimming over with history.)

He also notes that the earth's level has risen to such an extent that there is no way of reconstructing what ancient Rome once looked like. He bemoans the fact that the ruins are heaps of bricks and stones, and that he finds no marble facings—not because they're beautiful but because they held inscriptions; again, the eye of the scholar, not the artist.

How to explain the fact that the only remarks on art in Montaigne's travel journal are so meager and uninteresting? It seems unjust and simplistic to explain it by a lack of aesthetic sensibility. We should rather draw the conclusion that for people of the Renaissance, a work of art was a much more natural thing than it is for us; there was no need to set it apart from the surrounding reality and bury it in a museum. From that time onward the frames of paintings have grown heavier (for us they are borders between worlds), the air around sculptures has thickened like amber, the walls of cathedrals have been covered with varnish…Montaigne's glance met them as friends, trustingly, as objects among other objects—connected to the tree, the life growing all around, to the line of the horizon.

Yet a full explanation of the phenomenon should be put off until the time when a history of sensibility will be written. It has been remarked that the French poets and writers of the sixteenth century (Rabelais being an exception here) used smell, taste, and sound in their representations. It appears they were not able to "depict" a person or a place as "real," visually ascertainable to a reader. Similarly, for ancient authors man was a collection of inner traits; his realness was manifested in words and actions, less in external physical features. Lucien Febvre[3] says: "When we become acquainted with the writers of the sixteenth century, we are struck by the fact that, with a very few exceptions, they are not able to draw a sketch for the reader, nor to capture a likeness, create a protagonist of flesh and blood." The chronicler's monotony of Montaigne's descriptions may have its source right here.

Incidentally, with minor stylistic alterations and cuts, the *Voyage en Italie* could be published today as the latest literary sensation of the *nouveau roman* school. However, I doubt that this would give the author of the *Essays* much satisfaction.

Montaigne was more sensitive to the odd, the ingenious, the technically innovative, than to things of beauty. He doesn't omit to mention a single curiosity he encounters. His interest is particularly stirred by any kind of mechanism, especially waterworks, wells from which water is obtained by means of a pedal, various types of mills, a garden with hidden fountains serving to sprinkle unsuspecting passers-by. He devotes three pages to Augsburg's defense works. He zealously studies the construction of an organ in Bolzano. He feels an infinite admiration for Pratolino, the estate of the Grand Prince of Tuscany with its artificial grotto, hydraulic organ, moving statues, gun reports, and birds chirping. Montaigne provides this somewhat circus-like spectacle with the comment: "This exceeded anything we had ever seen."

This book, which we expect to be an excursion into the high realms of the spirit, is more reminiscent of a hotel and restaurant guide. The author seems often to have forgotten cathedrals, but he bends over his dinner plate with unfailing curiosity. He regrets not having brought his cook with him to learn the specialties of German and Swiss cuisine and as if for him Montaigne notes down exactly what he ate. He never neglects to immortalize a town where he has had good bread, wine, or fish. He gives a minute account of the service prices, but also notes whether the linen was clean; he complains that somewhere along the way there were no drapes around the bed and the table napkins were not changed often enough, to which the Italian publisher appends his offended commentary: Frenchmen of the sixteenth century did not use a fork at table, as the more civilized Italians did (see the learned work on cutlery, *La forchetta da tavola in Europa* by P. Lumbroso).

Montaigne writes so little about palaces and churches, it is as if visible things, there for all to see, to him were less worthy of attention than hidden ones, to which one is led by one's own perspicacity and curiosity. In a town famous for its cathedral he directs his steps to a little-known abbey where he admires —he says—the bones of the knights buried there, and visits a monk from Jerusalem, who shows him the library and the interesting features of the garden. And these are precisely the objects of Montaigne's traveler's quest: a fine library, a garden

with rare plants, an interesting man. Throughout his journey he does not neglect an occasion to meet renowned theologians (discussions with them were a passion of his). In order to hear all the voices of the world he also spends time chatting with the courtesans of Venice and Rome. In the Eternal City he pays his respects to a beloved book. Thanks to his good relations with the Church he is permitted to peruse a rare manuscript of the *Aeneid* in the Vatican Library. He notes with satisfaction that he did not find in the manuscript the first four lines, which he had always considered a later addition.

He listens. He listens to everyone and everything. To the sufferers in Villa, who tell him about their ailments, miraculous recoveries, about some mysterious stone from India; implausible stories told in villages and small towns: about a man before whom a church floor opened up, and a girl who, jumping over a puddle, suddenly changed into a boy. With unfailing attention he studies differences in religious rites. He attends a circumcision ritual and devotes five pages to what—he reckons—is the oldest religious custom.

Montaigne's journey was long and exhausting. The landscape moves slowly. Details settle in the memory like dust on the face. In those times the sense of melting into the concrete otherness of passing landscapes, people, and phenomena was much stronger than it is for a contemporary traveler. The latter is shielded from the surrounding world by international hotels, the conventionality of tourism, guide books, maps, the hasty touching of things worthy of closer attention, the commandment to associate with universal works instead of with the inimitable, individual beauty of life. Spaces are void (the foam of forests and towns, continents, and seas is broken on the windshield). Nowadays we travel "to and fro," without the benign deities of Nature and Accident, as if merely to compare a familiar reproduction with the original.

Should we then not envy Monsieur Montaigne, in whose undercarriage the sand sang somniferously, monotonously, and long.

1966

THE POET AND THE PRESENT[1]

I HAVE TO ADMIT that I had a negative response to the theme of this encounter, the poet and the present, because of its rather stubborn association with the barren pseudo-discussions of the era of socialist realism, and with normative poetics as a whole, which is alien to me.

Fortunately there are not many people today (so at least I think) who would defend arrogant and compromised theses on a poetry as a force that transforms the world and brings about sudden upheavals in social consciousness, or whose task is engagement on the one correct side of the so-called barricade.

History does not know a single example of art or an artist anywhere ever exerting a direct influence on the world's destiny—and from this sad truth follows the conclusion that we should be modest, conscious of our limited role and strength.

This sounds like an aesthete's avowal, an encouragement to lock oneself up in an ivory tower, but that stance, too, is quite alien to me. My concern is to oppose the tyranny of dichotomies chopping up complicated human reality, and to draw the borders of poetry—as I understand them—without usurpation but also without an inferiority complex.

A few months ago I returned from America; the necessity of "engagement" came up regularly in private conversations with my American friends. The term itself is vague enough to put one off using it. The majority of young people in the West who dabble in film, art, or literature, loudly declare they are on the side of the "Left"—variously understood, or rather, read. And I often wonder why the work that results from this essentially noble stance is intellectually immature, as if the

proclamation of humanist ideals led the artist into the realm of banality. I've often asked myself if it isn't too cruel a punishment that political kindheartedness should cancel out a work's artistic value.

In one of his essays Thomas Mann[2] reflects on the paradoxical pluriformity and contradictoriness of the spirit and its relation to the problem of man. The spirit, says Mann, is mani-layered, and it may take any attitude to human matters, including a non-humanist and anti-humanist attitude. The spirit is not a monolith, a cohesive force intent on shaping the world, life, or society in its image. It is true there have been efforts to proclaim the solidarity of all intellectuals but, the author of *The Magic Mountain* argues, that is a completely impossible undertaking. There is no deeper antagonism or more contemptuous and hateful intolerance than that between representatives of particular forms of thought and spiritual striving. There is something arbitrary about the idea that the spirit by its very nature—to use a social-political term—stands on the "left," and that therefore it is inherently connected to the ideals of freedom, progress, humanism. This is a prejudice that has been toppled many times by now. For the spirit can just as well stand on the "right," and that with undiminished excellence. Of the brilliant reactionary Joseph de Maistre[3], author of the book *Du pape*, Sainte-Beuve said "of a writer he had only the talent," a very handsome phrase, which expresses not only the aforementioned view that literature and progress are identical, but at the same time that with the greatest talent, the most excellent wit and brilliance, one may become the bard of the inhuman, executions, pyres, inquisitions, in short everything that progress and liberalism call the kingdom of darkness.

Here I have slid—quite consciously—onto the muddy terrain of politics. For our world, our present time, is described in categories of politics and science, not in categories of art. Hence the complaint of poets that they are homeless—which is true (but was never otherwise)—and the attempt to flirt with politics and science—which is a punishable offense.

The poet's sphere of action, if he has a serious attitude toward his work, is not the present, by which I mean the current state of socio-political and scientific knowledge, but *reality*, man's stubborn dialogue with the concrete reality surrounding him, with this stool, with that person, with this time of day—the cultivation of the vanishing capacity for contemplation.

And above all—building values, building a set of values, determining their hierarchy, which means a conscious moral choice with all the consequences in life and art that it entails—this seems to me the fundamental and most important function of culture.

We cannot be relieved of this task by politics, which is a game of chance and more and more merely a strategy, or an automatic mechanism unconnected to reality, instead of what it should be: the creation of a place for human initiative and courage.

Artists' attempts to enter into a dialogue with science more often than not yield lamentable results, simply because the physicist's image of the world is untranslatable into the language of art. Thanks to the avant-garde, the Futurists, we have gained one more disillusionment: the myth has collapsed that saw in the progress of knowledge a guaranteed solution of humanity's problems and troubles. The paradise of the Positivists turned out to be empty.

From these very general and, I realize, quite banal divigations I would like to move on to the art of poesy.

Now, without any pretensions to infallibility, simply stating my predilections, I would say that in contemporary poetry I like most those poems in which I observe something I'd call the mark of semantic transparency (a term borrowed from Husserl's logic). Semantic transparency is the characteristic of the sign that when used focuses attention on the signified object and does not draw attention to itself. The word is a window open on reality.

I like less (and sometimes not at all) poems thick with metaphors, with an abstruse syntax, "object poems," beyond

which nothing can be seen, whose aim is to focus the reader's attention on the author's mastery.

Hence the simple postulate, beautifully expressed by Thomas More in his prayer; I'm surprised that it has not yet become an important part of a poetic manifesto:

Grant me a soul to which dullness is naught,
knowing no complaint, grumble or sigh,
and do not permit me to give too much thought
to that domineering creature called the "I."
My Lord, endow me with a sense of humor,
give me the grace of understanding jest,
that I might know the joy that life harbors
and were able to grant it to the rest.

1972

CONVERSATION ON WRITING POETRY

A. I'LL BEGIN with an issue that may seem banal. I've noticed that readers at poetry readings often ask about a writer's beginnings. They simply want to know how you become a writer. Have you been asked questions like that?

B. Sure I have. I think you put it very well, too, because I, also, think that those questions are always or almost always founded in a desire to discover a secret, a mysterious spell, a formula that would help those who dream of a writer's career to attain it.

A. So what is the secret?

B. I don't know, sometimes it seems to me there is no secret. Don't get me wrong: I don't like so-called inspired writers, ones who pretend to the public that they move in spheres inaccessible to the average reader. Nor do I like those who come up with all kinds of bizarre adventures in their lives that they then say contributed to their becoming artists. That kind of making yourself out to be extraordinary is Romantic and quite alien to me.

A. I'm not giving up so easily. Surely it would be hard to deny that some aspects of a writer's biography, let's say experiences, can trigger a writing ability.

B. I venture to say that everybody or almost everybody has an ability to write, just as they have an ability to paint or compose simple pieces of music. If it were any different, poets would be writing for poets, composers would be understood only by their professional colleagues, and painters would paint only for other painters. Luckily, it's not like that. The perfect audience is an artist too, and a rare one at that. It's someone

who's able to recreate an aria, a painting's colors, a poem, in himself and with the same precision, the same disinterested joy, as if he were its author.

A. OK. Say you're right. Maybe a reader—or listener or viewer—is a potential author, that is to say, could make things, but neglected to, probably for lack of nerve. But you had the nerve. I'd like to know when and why.

B. All right, I'll say this: maybe it really is important. I started writing in the war. In this book, the poem "Two Drops" isn't the first I wrote, if I remember rightly, but it's the first I can sign off on years later. I was a teenager then. The war was on. During one of the heavy bombings I was running to a shelter and there on the steps I saw in passing—when I was being driven on by fear—a young couple kissing. It was truly extraordinary in that situation.

A. Why extraordinary?

B. Because in situations like the one I described terror takes people over completely, makes them forget about people they love. The survival instinct, awoken in moments of total danger, floods us with a rat-like fear, a single will to save ourselves alone. Whereas those two people opposed the raging cruelty around them with the frail power of love.

A. And you decided to describe it?

B. Not describe so much as express. You see, I didn't have the words to convey my revolt and opposition. I could have written something like: "Ah, you damned so-and-sos; you're killing innocent people, you bastards; you wait, you will be punished for this." I didn't say that, because I wanted to give the singular situation a broader dimension, or rather, show its deeper, universal human perspective.

A. But doesn't doing that make poetry something cold, abstract, cut off from life? Your explanation of the origin, the cause for "Two Drops" clarifies a lot for me, but what about the reader who doesn't know the explanation?

B. It's not possible, nor is it even necessary, to explain poems by describing the moment that inspired them. That's

why at first I didn't want to talk about my life. A literary work, like any work of art, has to be independent, stand on its own feet, separate from the experiences that summoned it from the murky realm of images, emotions, intuitions. It has to be captured in language in a way that speaks to the imagination. I've just been writing an essay on Minoan culture, which was discovered on Crete seventy years ago and has been troubling scholars ever since. That culture's discoverer, Evans, and other archaeologists too, passed on to us the ruins of splendid palaces, frescoes, marvelous pottery from three thousand years ago; looking at those masterpieces, one feels admiration and wonder. But we know very little about the lives of the Minoans and how their minds worked, because their script (so-called Linear B and hieroglyphics) has not been deciphered. By that I want to say that only in language can man become fully manifest—his troubles and joys, the values he accepted, his beliefs.

A. I'd like to return to my question, though. What hampers readers in reading contemporary poetry is—it seems to me—its chilliness, abstractness, and excessive intellectualism. Have you never had that kind of reproach directed at you?

B. You're touching on a very crucial question and here in turn we have to clear up some misunderstandings that have grown up around contemporary poetry. I won't talk about all contemporary poetry, because I can't, it's made up of so many trends and for many of them I feel no sympathy. But I'll talk about how I see these things. However, let me turn our roles around for a moment and ask you a question. What do you think is most important to an author?

A. Being read, and being read with recognition, or even adoration.

B. Certainly, but even more important than that is that the reader accepts what I would call the rules of the game. The cardinal principle is understanding the author's intentions, his aims, his poetics, his world. This has nothing to do with an uncritical attitude to art, but you can't expect an author to be everything, simultaneously playful and sad, profound and easy, learned and a simpleton. A writer invites a reader to a

game, a serious game, a game of the imagination, and he can only be judged on how he carries on the game, that is to say, how he fulfills his promises in the framework of the convention or contract he has proposed. That is the only way to criticize a book. But let's get back to that darn intellectualism of contemporary poetry.

A. Why darn…?

B. Because it's based on a misunderstanding which I'll try to clear up. It's true that the majority of readers like poems that are—let's say—emotional, that is, poems in which we can easily recognize emotions we know. So you have the sunset and the melancholy feeling that accompanies it, or the mournful thought of someone who has passed away, or the joy of meeting someone dear whom we haven't seen in a long time. I don't at all mean to ridicule such feelings…

A. Especially since in the hands of a Słowacki[1] or Kochanowski[2]…

B. Exactly. *I am downcast, Lord, Lamentations*, etc. But returning to myself, I want to say that in my attitude to emotions there is a certain suspicion or reserve, because I've seen too many explosions of enthusiasm or explosions of hatred toward persons or things that didn't deserve them. And then the control of reason is invaluable.

A. So, you are an intellectual poet.

B. I don't like that label, because I don't know what it means. I only know that I haven't written a single line to dazzle anybody with my knowledge or erudition. And apart from that I had an experience that I will permit myself to cite here. In the days when I was studying philosophy we were supposed to observe selected children in kindergarten and note down on big sheets which activities were an expression of their will, reason, or emotion. I quickly came to the conclusion that you can't divide and separate these three spheres of the soul. That goes for adults, too.

A. But the subject of your poems is not direct experience but rather reflection on the world?

B. Even if that's the case, it doesn't in any way exclude an emotional attitude. After all, one can and even should think passionately.

A. All the same you'll agree that certain ideas, their predominance in poetry, can make reading more difficult.

B. Perhaps. But please understand me rightly: a poem that sounds like a record playing an old tango doesn't appeal to me. I'd like, and here is my faith in the reader, for him to be my ally, for him to work with me. I think that writers who offer easy entertainment have contempt for their readers. I treat a reader like a partner, with full respect for his difference, his powers of judgment and criticism.

A. Do you agree with the claim that in your poems content is more important than form, that is, that you put a greater emphasis on "what" is said than on "how" it's said?

B. School got us accustomed to a division into content and form; you no doubt remember how teachers used to torment us with exercises based on giving a paraphrase of a poem. Obviously that's nonsense. It's only in bad poems that you can separate content from form, noble thoughts from the clumsy expression of those thoughts. The idea that a poet is someone who pours his content in different little bottles of form is completely wrong. One bottle is a sonnet, another is an octave, another is so-called blank verse. In fact, content is inseparable from form from the very beginning of the creative act.

When I write I'm not trying to astonish a reader with a wealth of similes, with outlandish language or refined rhythms and images. In my poems I'd like words and their configurations to be transparent.

A. What does that mean?

B. That means that they shouldn't catch the reader's attention, they shouldn't prompt him to exclaim "What a genuis!", but they should show reality in the purest and most transparent way.

A. So your poetic ideal is objective poetry, otherwise known as classical poetry—as distinct from stormy, emotional,

subjective Romantic poetry?

B. Some critics have been inclined to define it that way. But for me the question of the quarrels between various schools, tendencies, or poetics isn't the most important thing. There's a quarrel in poetry that's much more essential, namely that of attitudes.

A. Could you expand on that?

B. I think every beginning poet tries to give himself out to himself and to the people he's close to as an exceptional person, unlike anybody else, tries to demonstrate his incomparable talent. But if a writer persists in the trade or calling after he turns thirty, he is inevitably confronted with the thought—why do I write, in defense of what values, against what injustice? Talent is a valuable thing, but it goes to waste without character. What do I mean without character? I mean without a conscious moral attitude toward reality, without a stubborn, uncompromising borderline between what is good and what is evil. For that reason writers are valued not only for their skill but for being uncompromising, for their courage, their disinterestedness—which are extra-aesthetic qualities.

A. One of your volumes of poetry is titled *Study of the Object.* You've written many poems whose "protagonists" are a stone, a stool, a knocker, a chair—in other words, banal objects of everyday life. One could describe that as one of your spheres of interest. But then there's another, opposite, strongly contrasting group of poems, like "Elegy of Fortinbras," devoted to mythology, history, historical or literary figures. How do you resolve this contradiction?

B. One shouldn't resolve contradictions. But one should be conscious of them. A work of art isn't a scientific theory that has to be internally coherent. We live in a world of contradictions and we ourselves are the victims of contradictory ideas, impulses, imaginings. And I don't think moving between two poles is evidence of a weak personality at all.

A. But does it seem right to you to divide your poems—as I have—in a very general way into poems about objects and poems about culture?

B. That is a division according to themes, and so to some extent it helps in an initial orientation. But you're probably interested in knowing why I wrote both poems about a stool and about Hamlet, about the banal quotidian and sublime cultural figures?

A. Yes, because there must have been some reasons guiding you…

B. Then I'll try to explain it. I've lived through—if not personally then as a witness—more than one compromised ideology, many a breakdown of an artificially constructed image of reality, a capitulation of faith in the face of facts. At those times the domain of objects, the domain of nature seemed to be a point of support, as well as a point of departure for the creation of an image of the world that might accord with our experience. After the departure of false prophets, objects showed their innocent faces, so to speak, faces untarnished by lies. It's connected to an old dream of poets…

A. Of Arcadia…

B. Of a paradise, a place of human happiness. But poets do not have power over the world. Their only kingdom is speech. Only in that sphere are they sovereign rulers and legislators.

A. But language is a common medium of communication for all people.

B. That's exactly where the problem lies. Language is an impure instrument of expression. Tortured on a daily basis, made banal, subjected to base treatment. So the dream of poets is to reach the virgin meaning of words, to give things their proper names, as Norwid says. "Let words mean only what they mean and not against whom they are used." That's a quote from another great poet. For me the dialogue with objects was such an attempt to reach the pure sources of speech. It was also a rebellion against liars and swindlers.

A. And that other pole of your work? Poems about mythology, history? Critics say you are a poet of culture.

B. I don't take that as an insult, although from the lips of people who demand absolute innovation of artists it sounds like a reproach. This is a very serious problem, so I'll take the liberty of laying out what I have to say more or less systematically. It seems to me absolutely essential for every artist to work on evolving his own active relationship to tradition, if possible to tradition as a whole and not just one generation, as some young poets often do, sticking out their tongues at their predecessors, and forgetting about Homer, Aeschylus, Horace, Dante, and Shakespeare.

A. So you propose a flight into the past?

B. That's not what I'm proposing at all. I said "active relationship to tradition," a recognition that we are a link in a great chain of generations, which lays a responsibility on us. People often talk about a "cultural legacy." But culture is not inherited mechanically, like a house, let's say, left by someone's parents. We have to labor for it in the sweat of our brow, acquire it for ourselves, prove it on ourselves. And here the justification and explanation that we live in an extraordinary time won't help us, because every age of humanity has been extraordinary. It's also wrong to assume that culture lives and is sustained by itself, stored in libraries and museums. History teaches us that peoples and their achievements can be almost perfectly destroyed. During the war I saw libraries on fire. The same fire consumed wise and stupid books, good and evil books. I understood then that nihilism is the greatest threat to culture. The nihilism of fire, stupidity, hatred.

A. And yet you return to memories, to personal experience?

B. Yes, although I make an effort to be as objective as I can and not to talk about myself. I see I'm not very good at it.

A. So perhaps you could say in closing what culture is to you and why there are so many allusions to the Bible, to mythology and history in your poetry?

B. The basic function of culture is to build values worth living for. There's the old notion of the humanist, one dear and meaningful to me, though ridiculous and unfashionable to others. For others it means an aging gentleman who reads the classics but is lost in the modern world; a helpless relic of the past. But a humanist is someone who tries to assimilate, to make himself familiar with and make his own the widest possible area of reality. To create a world, or at least an image of the world, to man's measure—the measure of his capacity for understanding and feeling. Why do I return to Biblical or historical themes in my poems? I never do it to wow readers. Nor is it in my view a flight from reality. Fortunately the age which opposed mythology to realism is past. Ancient tales and legends contain essential human experiences. And when I write about Apollo and Marsyas, for example, I'm not just copying the myth from a handbook of Greek mythology, I'm trying to read an old tale about a cruel duel anew and answer the question what content, what truth is still current and alive in it. Not just for myself but I hope for my readers as well.

1973

THE PRESENCE OF HISTORY[1]

I FIND MYSELF IN a pretty awkward situation. I'm supposed to talk on the subject of *Gegenwart der Geschichte,* the presence of history, not being a professional historian, just barely an amateur and that, I fear, only for masochistic reasons. In addition, the meaning of current events eludes my—surely quite limited—powers of understanding. So I am competent in neither the sphere of *Gegenwart,* nor that of *Geschichte.*

We are all, however, all without exception, embedded in history, or to use the macabre image, we are prisoners of history. To put it more precisely, not all of us: to some it still seems that they enjoy an illusory freedom, others are now under investigation, some are already in the dock. As for myself, I think I have already been given a guilty verdict. After a verdict you have a lot of time, various everyday cares and worries fall by the wayside, so you can devote yourself to serious studies—of the prison system, for example—or you can simply philosophize. Not only the work of Boethius but many other valuable books have been written in such circumstances.

I would now like to say how I understand the somewhat enigmatic theme of our discussion: the presence of history. I assume the aim of our encounter is to consider a fairly universal phenomenon, namely the disappearance, the dying away of historical consciousness in industrial society. One can understand the process, explain it and call it inevitable. In the construction of a brave new world the past is a hindrance, an obstacle, a superfluous ballast—like the perhaps pretty but not very functional or useful buildings of centuries past to those who are planning new sunlit neighborhoods, new houses with

their windows open on the future. We are probably all lovers of air, light, greenery—but it seems to me that the past does not allow itself easily to be erased with the aid of bulldozers.

I said "disappearance of historical consciousness in an industrial society" and I realize that is a hypothesis, an assumption, a subjective feeling that I can't support with any statistics. Someone might reply that it's not like that at all, because books on the Germans, Celts, and Hittites enjoy enormous popularity, and a book on a dictator's sexual neuroses can always count on an enthusiastic reception. But interest in a historical subject is not equivalent to what I called historical consciousness, which implies a sense of continuity and the inescapable presence of time past in time present.

It seems we are all fascinated by our own exceptionality, by the sense that we live in incomparable times, without analogy to what came before. It is a kind of civilizational narcissism. The past is moving away from us as rapidly as the earth from an interplanetary spaceship. Light years cannot be broken down into generations. Cosmic time is beginning to compete with human time.

So it is not strange that we do not follow our ancestors and do not turn for advice, instruction, models of behavior, or ideals, to the so-called treasure-house of the past. That storehouse of experiences seems to us suspect, ambiguous, dubious. We don't really know what to do with it. In any case, it seems we cannot draw from studying the crooked paths of humanity any rational premises to guide our conduct in the here and now. History is not a popular subject of study for the young, is not an incentive to the actions of pragmatic individuals at the age of adulthood; it is at most a melancholy consolation for the elderly.

No one denies that the past exists, although we try to push it under the surface of consciousness. It exists, because it stands in the way of politicians, urbanists, pedagogues. It's big, mute, heavy, awkward. Even if it's dead—as some claim—it can't be hidden or destroyed without a trace.

One of the real reasons people regard the past with distaste is the fact that many Europeans have no particular reason to be

proud of what took place on our continent in the last several decades. It's pleasant to engage with history when one has a sense of one's own innocence, righteousness, and serenity. Then it's easy to pass judgment on the past, defend the oppressed, and brand the tyrants. But the slaughter of Samians on the orders of the young Pericles, the crusade against the Albigensians, the destruction of Aztec civilization by Cortez—spook us because they have analogues in recent history. History turns into a balance sheet of conscience—it condemns, reminds, robs us of peace.

If the future account of the times we live in is going to be a synthesis, a critical edition of all the diaries in the world, plus documents as yet unknown to us, I wonder whether it's worth living another 25 years to find out how I was swindled and who was chiefly to blame. Is it worth frantically holding onto this life another quarter century to read in a diary what the secretary general of the United Nations felt in the depths of his diplomatic soul when he accepted a doctorate *honoris causa* from the University of Prague in 1975 A.D., or what Pope Paul VI talked about with Daddy Idi Amin in the same year? Speaking for myself (I'm in the position of a condemned man, whose instinct for self-preservation tells him he should rid himself of morbid curiosity) I can easily die without that knowledge.

Someone may say that these are all quasi arguments against history drawn from the man in the street, from the feelings of the uneducated masses. But perhaps that's exactly what it's all about: I'd like to understand the resistance of the average person to history.

The development of historical studies in the age of Enlightenment and the nineteenth century was connected to the conviction that history can be understood and directed in a rational manner, that it falls into a transparent pattern clear to the mind, that it proceeds along a rising arc of progress. Today not many of us share that optimistic belief.

It seems that contemporary history, happening before our eyes, compromises history in general, which judging by our experience, was, is, and will continue to be a play of forces,

full of lies, crimes, violence, and unleashed irrationalism. Across a significant part of our planet human rights are consistently and brutally violated. The history of the world—as the philosopher says—*ist eine Strasse, die der Teufel pflastert mit zerstörten Werten*[2]. So is it worthwhile to study that sad and bitter knowledge? The only practical conclusion that seems to flow from it is that we must be prepared for the very worst.

Looking for an exit from this vicious circle, let us turn for advice, for the light of knowledge, to the professionals, to contemporary historians. But they answer unwillingly or not at all the question of the meaning of history (which is almost equivalent to the meaning of life). They refer the naïve ones demanding an answer to historiosophists, who have the same bad reputation as astrologers in the eyes of astronomers.

It is difficult to reproach contemporary historians for sharpening their methodological tools and chiseling away at details. They are guided by a wise scientific caution, skepticism, and minimalism. They frown on hasty generalizations and strive to cleanse history of the assaults of ideology, politics, and prejudices that have grown up over the ages. They are aware of how often history has been used by the strong against the weak, how often the explication of the past has had as its aim the fortification, sanction, and expiation of power.

Honest historians of the present don't want to commit this error bordering on a crime. It does them credit. In the end it is better than being fed on half-truths or plain lies. But the need for a book on the history of the world is still urgent and alive. The need for an objective history, inclined to reflection, not to making fists and uttering shrill cries. A history written not from the point of view of races, nations, or subversive organizations. But to this day there has never been such a history. The attempts by Wells, Spengler, and Toynbee met with great interest on the part of readers, but also with the virtually universal condemnation of professionals. We may have to reconcile ourselves to the thought that until the end of human history we will not have a complete picture of the

physical world, nor will we know the meaning and aim of our strivings here on earth.

How happy the historians must have been for whom the history of humanity was a struggle between good and evil in which good, guaranteed by divine providence, had to win. The mechanism was simple, as well as pedagogically effective. It offered examples of heroes, kings, saints worthy of imitation.

I admit that I mourn that old history, which was colorful, narrative, and moralizing. Even if it was a simplified and not very scientific history, it had the great virtue that it constituted, created values.

Those who during the centuries past fought for various ideals, for freedom, human dignity, and most often lost those battles, had the hope that they would be given the proper recognition by future generations, that they would find a cherished spot in human memory and that the future chronicler would weigh their sacrifice. In their last words they appealed directly to the high tribunal of history. Today it is as if that consolation and pathos have been stifled. A sober historian will not make moral judgments on persons or events. In the best case he lays bare mechanisms, registers facts. He does not lodge appeals. What happened had to happen.

I am nearing the end of these divigations. And I feel the need to strike a positive note.

It seems to me that even in the prison of history where I dwell, it is possible to behave in a dignified or in a less dignified manner. And it also seems to me that in spite of all the reservations, doubts, and problems I've raised and which history procures, we can't just set it aside or say we'll pay attention to it at a better, more suitable moment.

We can't do this, if only because the problems of the past that our minds cast off, as well as the injuries or crimes passed over in silence, can easily be put to use by demagogues. We know very well what the consequences of that can be.

In my introduction I mentioned historical consciousness, and I think humankind should not abandon it for the cheap gain of pragmatic political successes.

We have to accept the bitter legacy of history with humility, without looking for the easy justifications, saying that one way or the other we're doomed, determined.

Historical consciousness is the mental and moral attitude that accepts the past as the vast field of human experience—errors, crimes, but also examples of courage and wisdom—and that presumes that our actions here and now will find continuation in the future.

Such a historical consciousness is connected with the unfashionable concept of conscience, which should be integral, indivisible, independent of our national or political sympathies. If we rush to the aid of victims of natural disasters and feel compassion for them no matter where they occur, we should behave similarly toward victims of historical catastrophes, wherever they occurred or will occur, in Prague or Santiago de Chile, Moscow or New York, Berlin or Warsaw.

All of these are of course pious wishes. I truly do not know that a humanity liberated from history would not be happy. Perhaps we will be able to build cities without monuments and replace history with sociology, social engineering, or something along those lines. And create—*horrible dictu*—a new man worthy of new times. A new Adam who will sit under the tree of the knowledge of good and evil—naked, innocent, and without a navel.

1975?

QUALITY AND NULLITY IN MASS CULTURE[1]

OVER A YEAR ago changes were introduced into Polish radio consisting mainly of new limits on literary programming, radio plays, serious discussion programs, and features. Channel 1, which has the greatest reach and is listened to by our compatriots abroad, has become almost exclusively the domain of sound—not of the best quality.

It doesn't come easily to me to talk about television, because I think the medium is not and (unlike radio) will probably never be very appealing to those working in the "creative arts." In my view theater, poetry, music, painting, and even film shown on a small screen bear the same relation to their originals as does a shoddy reproduction, a reproduction falsifying the original.

I think the greatest achievement of Polish television was the great monologue of General Berling[2]. It was not only the moving confession of a wise and experienced man, but something with the weight of a historical document. It's a pity, however, that such rarities are drowned in a flood of mediocrity.

The proper sphere of television is catching reality on the fly, and that's why I like sports coverage most (I suspect that many television owners pay their fees for four years just to watch the next Olympics), but also authentic "live" reportage. I also predict a great future for programs like *High Stakes* or *On the Record*, on the condition that the objects of their ruthless analysis and revelations of fraudulence and mendacity are not only writers, department store managers, and the directors of electric companies.

A separate problem, which the questionnaire does not address, is the matter of the strange language used on television. For a number of years now many people appearing on television not once but regularly, abuse our mother tongue with impunity. If a well-known journalist with a big personality makes excruciating mistakes we should consider whether it might be best to replace him with someone less accomplished, lower down on the ladder, who nevertheless respects the rules of grammar. This is a question of enormous social consequence. Millions of people watch and listen to television. Only a few hundred people voluntarily take up the *Handbook of Style*. I am not talking about any exaggerated purism. It would be absurd to demand a commentator on a soccer game to speak the language of Father Skarga[3] (he wouldn't be able to keep up with the game), but he should make a special effort not to do worse than a kid who's been through elementary school—or let's say secondary school.

Mass culture in Poland is a major question—everyone probably agrees on that—but we don't know what to do about it. It should therefore be a subject of discussion—exhaustive, concrete discussion, in which we leave aside the interesting and clever analyses of American theorists (for we live in societies that don't bear much comparison). We should talk about what can and should be done here and now, about concrete proposals, means, people. And also try to answer a fundamental question: how can we give mass culture—which homogenizes, fragments, and diminishes culture and mixes the hopelessly small with the great—a little order, humanism, and a few consciously chosen values?

There is a dangerous tendency to "play off" mass culture against culture in the strict sense, demonstrating the social insignificance of a book of poetry, a serious play, or a difficult piece of music compared to the overwhelming demand for a hummable tune, cheap entertainment, kitsch—which it is said the masses adore. This antagonism exists and has always existed (Seneca "lost" in a contest with gladiatorial spectacles), but I for the life of me can't understand why we would want to deepen the antagonism.

I am too good a student of Stefan Kisielewski[4] to succumb to delusions of a paradise of aesthetes, and I reject the vision of a society listening (under duress) to Dante, Beethoven, and Norwid from dawn to dusk. However, I also know that striving for higher values, in the aesthetic sphere as well, is not the aristocratic privilege of a chosen few but can be shared by many, on the condition that they make the effort to acquire independence, to refine their tastes and minds, and reject what is easy.

The cardinal error of those creating mass culture in Poland is the desire to program and plan, instead of trying to understand the authentic desires, needs, aspirations people have. Those who put together and perform the programs on Polish radio and television could use some humility and an awareness that the people watching them and listening to them are adult, critical, and severe in their judgment.

I realize that to some my remarks may seem onesided and tendentious. I haven't mentioned the role of television as the Great Soporific for people worn out by hard work. Or the Great Soporific of boisterous children.

1976

VOICE

...che sola agli occhi miei fu lume e speglio

GOOD OLD GUIDO Noia had sent another letter. Petrarch had maintained that strange friendship, formed in the distant past when both of them were studying law in Bologna, but for a long time now they had had nothing to say to each other. Ah, Guido was no Atticus[1]! He remained faithful, devoted, and desperately banal; he wrote lengthy letters without any regard for style, reported in detail on his worries with his numerous family, on his modest professional successes, trials won, appeals granted, and what was worse, probably to make himself worthy of his great correspondent, he often quoted ancient authors, mercilessly distorting their immortal lines and maxims. Poor Guido—Petrarch often thought—he had made the worst use of his law studies: he had become a lawyer.

However, this time the letter lying in front of him put him in a state of anxiety and emotional chaos. Guido informed him:

"Two weeks ago our unforgettable preceptress Donna Novella passed away. I write this *cum lacrimis*[2]. I'm sure you will remember her lectures. She always spoke from behind a curtain because her extraordinary beauty—it was universally claimed—might distract the attention of her audience. It's funny: no one saw her but everyone, including you, Francesco, fell madly in love with her. We were prepared to do battle on behalf of that bodiless creature and die with her sweet name on our lips. I think we were mad, Francesco, but I wouldn't give up that madness of youth for anything!

I can still hear her voice today—melodious, sonorous, like music, with a range that seemed to span the whole scale. A voice at times low, resolute, almost masculine, and at times very feminine and seductive, especially when she said, or reminded us, that law is *ars boni et aequi*[3]. She uttered that ‘aequi’ like a declaration of love.

You, Francesco, are a poet; you commune with the great spirits of the past. I am a humble servant of the law, although recently I received a letter of praise from the *podesta* for my efforts to improve the health of our municipal finances—I won’t attempt to conceal what a great distinction it was—so I encounter evil and injustice in the course of practicing my profession, but believe me when I say that until now I had no idea how great, how disgraceful and how limitless is human iniquity. And that is what I wanted to write to you about.

Before the burial Donna Novella, or rather her mortal remains, were laid out on a high candle-lit bier in the Church of Santo Lorenzo. The whole body was covered with a black cloth embroidered with silver lilies and the emblems of our university. Well now, just imagine: at night some scoundrel crept in there and uncovered the face of the departed. The next day the whole city knew of Donna Novella’s true countenance.

Her face bore the marks of small-pox, which she must have had in childhood. Her skin was swarthy like the skin of a common peasant woman, and covered with a net of wrinkles. On the left side of her face she had a large scar running from her temple across her cheek down to her chin.

Because she lived alone and died suddenly, no one had closed her eyelids. In the left eye that scoundrel—worse, that sacriligious rogue—observed leucoma. The lips which had dropped the sweet honey of knowledge into our hearts and minds so many years ago were open in a cry of terror. In addition, and this is the worst thing, it had been neglected, doubtless because of the haste, to cover her head with a bonnet —and just think, my dear friend—Donna Novella was completely bald.

The whole city seethed with rumors. Everyone who could, joined in the contest of baseness, adding new details intended

to witness to the monstrous ugliness of the departed. And only recently everyone had been praising her unearthly beauty to the skies.

The funeral was carried out quickly, almost stealthily, without the proper respect due to that extraordinary being.

Thus was our youth and love dishonored.

I weep, Francesco, and you must weep with me."

Petrarch wrote back immediately, business-like and cool, making sure not to allow the haste of his reply to betray in any way his true emotions.

"In your last letter, you informed me of the death of Donna Novella. It may surprise you, though it ought not to, that I do not remember her at all. Not her voice, nor even her name. The idea that I loved her, dear Guido, is the work of your fantasy. I have always considered you a levelheaded and sober man, so I truly do not understand whence come these notions and improper insinuations.

You have probably confused me with someone else. Perhaps it was Agapito Collonna, Guido Settimo, or that charming madcap Tommaso Caloria, who fell prey to such boyish feelings? Or even my cherished brother Gerardo, who now lives in the hush of a monastery, beyond the reach of earthly things.

As you know well, the study of the law, on which I embarked because my father desired it, was for me a torment beggaring description. I lost irretrievably seven precious years of my youth. Is that not sufficient reason for me to erase from memory everything that went on around me at that time? I seized every occasion to escape from those mortally dull lectures to my beloved authors—Cicero, Virgil, Horace. No earthly voice, not even the most intoxicating face of a woman, could alter my one, true passion and faithful attachment.

Forgive me for the brevity of this letter. Yesterday I received, or rather, obtained under false pretenses from a certain monastery library, a codex containing a number of awkwardly bound and uninteresting writings, with among

them one treasure: the *Bucolics*. A cursory reading led me to suspect that I have before me a text that is, of all the ones known to me, least marred by copying errors. I have immersed myself in work completely."

He did not return to reading Virgil. He was seized by panic, by a horror that destroyed all thought and feeling. Guido's letter was an attack, yet another attack on the sacred secret of his soul. Now—he was certain of it—the elaborate architecture of the beautiful fiction he had built patiently for years would crumble into dust.

In fact, his whole life Petrarch had loved only one woman —Donna Novella—as only boys can love, with a great, absurdly lofty, bashful, tormented love. It was total abandon that did not demand reciprocity or reward, a feeling beyond place and time—and therefore eternal.

He had invented Laura in Avignon and never met any young lady of that name, which lent itself like no other to erotic wordplay. The two radiant syllables expressed a multitude of things and their metamorphoses, objects and echoes of objects: fair hair, a gentle gust of wind, a flickering, breaths of air, laurel, a green and golden tree. "L'aura che'l verde lauro e l'aureo crine…[4]"

The fine Sienese master then active in Avignon, Simone Martini, couldn't understand why his young friend asked him with such insistent ardor to paint a portrait of Laura, whom he had never seen. How could he suspect he was being drawn into a conspiracy, that he was supposed to be the instrument of incarnation, that is, without his consent and knowledge, he had the mission thrust upon him to bring to earth a being without shape and to give her from among the thousands of different possibilities a unique, concrete, sensual form.

He finally yielded to the pressure put on him and executed several sketches, from which Petrarch immediately picked one, saying with indescribable enthusiasm that the portrait conceived in the painter's imagination accorded precisely with the original like the mirror reflection of a face; her very eyes with the sweetly heavy upper lids, exactly her bundle of fair hair, her small childlike mouth, sublime neck, her pious, gentle

hands. Simone, showered with praise, promised he would put Laura in a fresco he was just then painting on the wall of the Papal Palace. And so he did.

A real voice was united to an invented name and figure. Laura became a shield covering Petrarch's singular, defenseless love. The rest was just a matter of poetry.

Nevertheless, evil tongues (the human passion for destroying all that is beautiful and pure is truly fathomless) gave the poet no peace. A friend from the university lecture halls and thus a witness from his youth, the skeptical Giacomo Colonna, made him his special target—stubbornly, eagerly, and with poorly concealed glee. At every opportunity he gave it to be understood that Laura was the creature of the poet's imagination, and worse, he dared to write to Petrarch about it. Petrarch, touched to the quick, feeling as if he had been deprived of earth and air, wrote back with a vehemence which he neither wanted nor was able to temper.

"What are you saying? That I invented the convenient name Laura to have someone to talk about and to be talked about myself for that reason; that in fact Laura is nothing to my soul, nothing but a poetic laurel for which I yearn…And so in that living Laura whose shape allegedly bewitched me, everything is artifice—the songs fabricated, the sighs feigned?

If your joke only went that far! If only this was all about pretense, not about madness! But believe me: no one can pretend for long without a great effort, and to make an effort to be taken for a madman is truly the height of madness! I will add that one can fake an illness while being in good health, but one cannot fake a true pallor. You know my sufferings and my pallor. So please take care that your Socratic joke does not bring on illness in me."

The sober-headed Boccaccio—not a youthful companion of the poet because of the difference in their ages, and therefore a witness whose testimony has no force of proof—also took part in this curious trial of voice, name, and body. His verdict was dry and categorical: "I myself am persuaded that Laura should be understood allegorically."

Meanwhile, Petrarch went on tirelessly building the labyrinth. In the center to which he alone had access (was he not at once Daedalus and the Minotaur?) the non-existent Laura reigned. He invented everything for her—her birth from nothingness, the color of her hair, the radiance of her eyes, her elusive existence. Now he had to invent the date of her premature ascension to heaven.

It cannot be an accident that it was in the most valuable book of his library—a parchment codex containing the works of Virgil with a commentary by the Roman grammarian Servius—that Petrarch wrote these words: "with bitter sweetness, in painful memory of the event."

"Laura, famed for her virtues and long praised in my songs, appeared before me for the first time in the dawn of my youth, Anno Domini 1327 on the morning of April 6th in the church of Sainte-Claire in Avignon. And in the same place in the year 1348, also in April and also on the 6th day of that month, in the early hours of that day, that light left the world when I happened to be in Verona—Ah!—oblivious to my fate."

A farewell inscription, a little too literary, apparently appealing to the tender hearts of posterity. That epitaph, stuck to the cover of the poet's most beloved book, is longer than the fragment quoted above, and it goes on to speak of Laura's loveliest and purest flesh, of the soul, God, Scipio Africanus, Seneca, the flight from Babylon…But the two first sentences, referring to concrete events, calling persons, place, and time to witness, prompt doubts that seem justified.

For one thing, the attempt to make the history of this unreciprocated love geometrical, to give it the shape of a circle, and thus of a symbol of perfection, is suspect. From the birth of the emotion to the beloved's death the hand of the magical clock describes a full circle. It stops after twenty-one years, on the same day, at the same hour.

Then, it isn't clear why Petrarch for the first and only time christened the object of his adoration "Laurea," not Laura or Lauretta, as he did in the sonnets. Could it be that the hand of the outstanding philologist, tried and tested in copying the

most difficult and illegible texts, so trembled with emotion that it lost control over the correct orthography?

There is no Church of Sainte-Claire in Avignon today. Nor do its ruins and fundaments exist. Was it only time that destroyed the drama's décor?

And finally the most astonishing thing. We know from experience that our memories retain caringly and faithfully the important dates of our lives; and surely the day—blessed for poetry—when Francesco and Laura first crossed glances for the first time was precisely such a date.

Nevertheless, there is an apparently minor but crucial disparity between two confessions made by the poet concerning that meeting so laden with consequence. In the epitaph we quoted, written on the cover of the Virgilian codex, Petrarch speaks of April 6, whereas we clearly read in one of the sonnets dedicated to the birth of his great love:

"Era il giorno ch'al sol si scoloraro[5]
per la pietà del suo fattore i rai…"

which is an unmistakable indication that the first meeting occurred on Good Friday, on the day of the Lord's Passion, when according to the testimony of the evangelists there was a solar eclipse. With the aid of a historical calendar we can easily ascertain that April 6, 1327, was not Good Friday but Easter Monday. If we take into account the great role the rhythm of the important religious holidays played in the life of those times, it is truly very difficult to understand this casual and reprehensible negligence in recollection.

So we have strayed onto tricky ground riddled with uncertain circumstantial evidence and indiscreet inferences. A criminological-literary method that strives to determine incontrovertibly the place, time, and victim of the crime of love, a pettifogging investigation into the reliability of the witnesses for the prosecution and defense, both aim to

announce triumphantly that Laura never existed. Laced with smug nihilism, it is all pedantically arid and futile.

Equally dubious, it seems to us, are the efforts of history's gossips, driven by a hunger for the concrete, who swear that the heroine of Petrarch's poems was a woman of flesh and blood, one among thousands of young ladies in Avignon. It is said her name was Laura de Noves and that at a young age she married a hearty Provençal, the marquis Ugo de Sade, whom she bore eleven children. A few months after her death the inconsolably grief-stricken marquis married again. A story straight from a naturalistic novel.

Let us not seek for Laura. May she lie in the alabaster tomb of three hundred sonnets. The history of that imagined and necessary love moves along a different trajectory than the course of earthly affairs. The essence of the mystery is in our grasping, apprehending, conjuring from the uncertain reports and scattered sources the curious fashion in which Laura existed.

Petrarch—let us say it again—loved only one woman, Donna Novella, with a desperate, blind, wrong love—for how else can you love a woman without a mouth, the color of whose eyes you don't know, a woman without hands whose whole being was—a voice. It was a feeling, a feeling too great, that is to say beyond the limits of form.

At that time he began writing poems dedicated to the Voice on the Other Side of the Curtain. The poems were hopelessly awkward, without beginnings or endings or even a middle pulsing with pain, full of empty exclamations and tedious repetitions, poems whose miserable vapidity he tried to conceal with the loud wailing of ancient heroines and gods. If those creations had any value at all, it could only have been that they accurately reflected his unbounded, nameless passion.

And then Petrarch made a great, that is to say a simple discovery. He realized that he had to invent a double for his love who would be born from his own rib like Eve from Adam's rib, and be the creature of his own royal imagination,

and therefore subject to his every whim, and above all worthy of an art governed by cool ardor and disciplined madness.

That is why he defended his sacred allegory so fiercely. He knew that while he lived he had to invent proof of the existence of his unreal woman, for after his death her fate would be identified with his poetry and after the world's ultimate conflagration—Laura would be inviolable, strong, immutable, and vivid as Penelope, Dido, Isolde, and Beatrice.

1981

MIRROR

1

DSOU-GI, AN INFLUENTIAL MINISTER in the kingdom of Tsi, stood in front of the mirror. Neither he himself nor anyone else could have foreseen that this fact, so banal, would have serious consequences and influence the kingdom's history in an entirely unexpected way.

The tailor had just brought him new ceremonial robes: a purple cloak lined with gold, a sky-blue kimono embroidered with pagodas and flowers, dragons and moons. To these silken splendors the minister added the noble oval of his face, smooth black hair woven into an artful braid, a shapely nose, a narrow mouth where thunderbolts and caresses, decrees and kisses lay in wait; eyes with almond lids discreetly outlined with a brush that expressed what the eyes of a dignitary ought to express: gentle strength. The mirror—which according to naïve notions reflects the truth, as if there were not different mirrors for lovers and suicides—that unreliable object at the mercy of changing moods—the mirror admired him and made courtly compliments.

Dsou-Gi was intoxicated with his own looks. He stood a long time motionless, as if wishing the image before him could be fixed for all time.

True wisdom is content with itself, but beauty demands confirmation, applause, and so Dsou-Gi asked his wife: "Tell me, am I more handsome than Mr. Si? (Mr. Si was universally considered to be the embodiment of male grace.) "Of course," his wife replied without hesitation. But Dsou-Gi was not yet completely persuaded, so he asked his concubine the same

question. “Mr. Si,” she said, “is barely even good-looking, and you are truly handsome. The difference between you is like that between the rising sun and a star fading at dawn.” Two voices, and women’s voices at that, were not enough to dissolve Mr. Dsou-Gi’s doubts, so he turned to a guest residing in his house and seeking favor at the royal court. The guest for a moment clumsily pretended he couldn’t remember who Mr. Si was, and finally replied gravely: “No one would dare compare a peacock (here he doubtless had in mind his host and protector) with a common sparrow.”

A few days passed. One afternoon the handsome Mr. Si visited the minister. Dsou-Gi observed him closely and at length and came to the conclusion that his visitor’s looks were unequaled. After the meeting he stood before the mirror once again. This time the mirror was withholding, cool, even repelling.

He did not sleep all night. He lay thinking. His wife considered him the model of beauty because they were bound by ties of love, his concubine was motivated by fearful deference, while the house guest was simply hoping for advancement.

The next day in a council with King Wei, Minister Dsou-Gi spoke up unexpectedly and on a subject apparently unconnected to the debate then being held: “I want to tell you a story about what just happened to me. I know I am not the most handsome of men, but because my beloved wife said I was, and my concubine, feeling a fearful deference, confirmed it, as did the house guest who is seeking my patronage—I was easily persuaded it was true. The Tsi kingdom is vast and bounteous—mountains that reach the heavens, cultivated fields, wild rivers flowing from the very center of the earth, a hundred and twenty populous cities and innumerable villages. The ocean on the eastern borders of our kingdom is like an enormous mirror reflecting our might. And you, King Wei, rise over your lands in a cloud of universal adoration. The courtiers and concubines love you, the ministers, provincial governors and minor officials feel for you a fearful deference, and all others hope for favors at your hands. And that is precisely why they are unable to speak the truth.”

“You’re right,” said King Wei. And he immediately issued a decree: “For the information of ministers, provincial governors, and the whole population. Whoever comes before me and points out my mistakes to my face shall receive an award of the first order. He who submits criticism of my government in writing shall receive an award of the second order. Those who in the streets, squares, and public spaces loudly—so that it may reach our ears—decry abuses of power, shall receive an award of the third order. That is our will.”

A chronicler reports that the decree had barely seen the light of day before crowds seeking awards and justice began to flock to King Wei’s palace. This went on for many months, and by the time a year had passed, peace and justice reigned, for no one could find anything to complain about, no matter how he wanted to. The chronicler closes his edifying tale with the dictum: “This is what is called vanquishing the enemy without leaving the palace.”

2

OLD MASTERS OF THE popular tale are familiar with the narrative strategy that leads by way of threefold repetition as by a threefold spell to a happy ending. But it is precisely the tale’s suspect symmetry, the abyss dividing the trivial first cause from the astonishing consequence—the tiny pebble of Dsou-Gi’s vanity thrown in the water making far-flung circles, awakening the dormant elements of the Tsi kingdom—all this arouses our distrust.

The true course of events was as follows.

After the publication of the decree urging people to criticize the government openly in the royal palace, not many came forward. From the point of view of the throne this was completely incomprehensible. King Wei was beside himself with indignation. Had he not with his own word guaranteed freedom of speech? Had he not released all prisoners and ordered the hated guardians of public order whom the people called “blood hounds” to be sent to labor in the silver mines? So why did the few who appeared before him not dare to raise

their eyes, why did their grievances amount to incomprehensible drivel, why did they bow down low asking for forgiveness?

On the other hand, the grievances submitted in writing flowed in such abundance (if a flood can be called an abundance of water) that a special Ministry of Laments had to be created. It employed an increasing number of scribes and clerks; the officials, as officials do, set to work eagerly at first, examined each application, each individual complaint, but soon they were no longer able to cope with the tasks that overwhelmed them. The reports they sent the king were initially precise and to the point, later more and more generalized and vague. In the end they did no more than inventory the letters that arrived, segregating them in enormous folio's entitled "Murders," "Torture," "Theft," "Extortion of Provincial Administrators," "Bureaucratic Corruption."

Oral criticism, for which the royal decree allotted the lowest level of award, was practiced by literally everybody. Never before had the inhabitants of the Tsi kingdom moved their lips so eagerly. However, with the exception of a few crazies doubtless drunk on rice wine, the complaints were made in a low voice, in a whisper, so they could not reach the ears of the king so hungry for truth. On the other hand the complaints provided their speakers inexpressible relief.

The good king Wei couldn't understood what was happening apart from the fact that the injuries inflicted on his subjects were great. He then summoned Mr. Dsou-Gi, who was now his closest advisor, chief ideologue, expert on public opinion (for finally that monster had been set loose) and better-future planner all rolled into one.

"I am not at all certain," said the king, "that one must see one's true face in the mirror. Perhaps it is good for philosophers but not for rulers. Until recently it seemed to me I knew myself and my subjects quite well. When I visited cities, and sometimes even remote villages, simple people came out to meet me bearing gifts, flowers, and anxious smiles —and you know that such inspections do not alter anyone's

fate and are nothing but a confirmation of my divine omnipresence. We were probably living in a delusion: they thought I was the embodiment of wisdom and goodness, and I was sure of their bottomless submission. Two illusions compacted with each other. And so it must be. Now I know nothing. How can an unsure king rule an unsure people?"

To this Minister Dsou-Gi replied: "You are mistaken, for you have achieved something that future generations will speak of with admiration. You loosened tongues, made people happy, gave them the priceless privilege of speaking of their injuries. A king who forbade mourning of the departed would be thought a crueler tyrant than one who allowed violence and crime. Tears and complaints reconcile one to the world. They allow people to bear their lot more easily."

King Wei was a lamb in the sphere of dialectics and not easily persuaded by convoluted proofs. Apart from that he didn't know exactly what "mourning" or "complaint" meant, he knew the words only from dictionaries and poems. "All right," he said, "but you will admit we have done nothing to let justice reign in our kingdom. Everything has remained as it always was. We haven't paid out one silver piece from the treasury, we haven't given anyone an acre or a bowl of rice. In a word, none of the plaintiffs have received compensation."

"That's true," said Dsou-Gi. "But we can't do that, because there are too many injured parties. (Here he mentioned an approximate but truly appalling number.) If we chose only a part of that mass, now that would be a screaming injustice." And after a moment's thought he added: "We should take one more step to ensure the happiness of our subjects. Reading various letters of grievance I noticed that no one holds anything against you; the whole of the people's resentment is directed against the provincial governors. We should sacrifice them on the altar of justice." Then he explained in brief what he had in mind.

In the state capital, on the Square of Heavenly Peace[1], a ceremonial decapitation of governors took place. Great masses of people made the journey from the farthest edges of the Tsi kingdom. The ceremony was conducted amid celebratory

silence. In the crowd's eyes were astonishment, bliss, and cruel innocence.

Now the people's happiness was truly beyond description. A fear arose that it would burst its banks (that period bore the apt name Period of the Spring Flood), and therefore should be closely monitored, lest enthusiasm break the bounds of reason. Following a council with the king, Mr. Dsou-Gi decided to hold back the Great Reforms for a certain time. He devoted himself to theoretical work.

The fruit of his efforts was a monumental work grandly titled *T'ien Ming*, or *Heaven.* A somewhat misleading title, as the subject of the treatise was neither astronomy, nor godly affairs, nor weather forecasts, but the nature of power, the king's relationship to his subjects, aside from a number of rather chaotically intertwined lines of thought and many poems—quite beautiful as it happens—in praise of the morning mist, snowy mountain tops, butterflies and frogs. The confusion of material may be attributed to the desire of the author—bored by his mind's celestial flight—to show his other, human face, a man's face turned to the earth.

No one had thought the Tsi kingdom was home to so many philosophers; they set out to "thrash" Mr. Dsou-Gi's work with a passion and with the cruelty particular to philosophers. That is to say they threshed his work of empty words, rhetorical flourishes, undefined concepts, and cardinal errors in reasoning, such as drawing risky conclusions from shaky premises. In the history of the kingdom this period is known as the "Period of the Hundred Schools," with a hundred here signifying a vast number.

Why—the philosophers asked—did Mr. Dsou-Gi so stubbornly contradict the generally held view that beyond the king there were two powers, two fundamental authorities, namely Heaven and the Shades of Worthy Ancestors? That is what made it possible to judge a ruler and his rule in the absolute categories of good and evil, as well as in temporal, historical terms established by tradition. Why did the author categorically deny both Heaven and Ancestors and introduce in their place the extremely vague term "Relentless Pulse of

History" and invest it with all the marks of existence and cosmic force by the primitive method of repeating the murky formula on almost every page? Mr. Dsou-Gi seriously maintains that he possesses absolute knowledge of the future, but he cannot clearly analyze the present. In other words, the philosophers of the Hundred Schools considered *T'ien Ming* the work of a demagogue. After a thorough clobbering nothing was left of the treatise but a handful of axioms, tautologies, aporias, and inner contradictions.

Mr. Dsou-Gi (who had long avoided facing mirrors) didn't defend himself, for he knew that true greatness cannot find understanding among its contemporaries. He accepted his fate, certain that the Relentless Pulse of History would show him to be in the right. He only explained that his work had not been intended for intellectuals but for ordinary people who scorn subtle ideas but love the imperative mood, simple predicates, memorable formulas (he passed over in silence the fact that ordinary people at that time were not trained in the difficult art of reading). Philosophers—Mr. Dsou-Gi said—are like shadows of fishermen fishing for shadows of fish on a non-existent lake. It was not difficult to predict the further course of events, nor did it surprise anyone. Philosophers were condemned and banished. They hid in inaccessible mountain monasteries. This was how the period of the Hundred Schools—referred to officially as the period of the Wicked Spiders—came to an end.

Creators of utopias situate their perfect societies on an imaginary map, in inaccessible spots, isolated from an invasion of brutal reality, under the unruffled sky of reason. Unfortunately the Tsi kingdom was subject to the law of all earthly creations; it was heavier than thought, it was tangible, three-dimensional, determined by space and time, with physical boundries. Beyond those boundries there were other kingdoms, whose rulers did not like the weak King Wei, Mr. Dsou-Gi, or his unpredictable reformist tendencies, and least of all the kingdom's inexplicably happy people. There are rebellions born in the very pit of desperate poverty. That has long been known. But there are others, perhaps more dangerous, that may explode at a moment when a people is

given a brief moment of delusory freedom. The innate condition of subjects is a condition of moderate wretchedness.

The ambassadors of neighboring states showered King Wei with compliments. They praised his sagacity and courage, but these were false mirrors in which the gullible king gazed at himself with delight, woefully unconscious of his fate.

Without a declaration of war, in early spring, the army of the bordering Dschao kingdom crossed the Haangho river, overwhelmed the border guards and moved quickly into the heartland. And then King Wei announced the first general mobilization in history. Every man grabbed what arms he had at hand and rushed to the aid of the threatened fatherland. On a vast plain near the city of Lo-yong, flails, axes, and hammers scored a splendid victory over the invading forces.

What were the people of Wei's kingdom fighting for so passionately and selflessly? Why did they give their lives without a word of complaint or revolt? Was their state not just as cruel and unfree as any other state at that time? Only Mr. Dsou-Gi, he alone, knew the answer. The subjects of Wei were fighting for freedom, or more precisely, fighting to preserve their beloved, invaluable freedom to grumble. It's not much, you'll say, but even so.

So the expanded version of the story of the mirror ends, like the first, optimistically—more than that, it ends with triumphant fanfares. The poetics of the fairy tale requires that we here take leave of the listener. However, there is an epilogue which may look like a different story, but only at first glance.

3

THE GOVERNMENT'S VERSION OF the war was inscribed on bronze tablets. Many poets and painters also extolled it. But centuries later their efforts appear to us oddly pale and unconvincing.

Art, and courtly art in particular (no other kind existed at that time) often does not tally with historical truth. For it is

easier to win a battle than surmount old artistic conventions, that is to say depict new content. And the content was quite new.

This is why long and boring epics in praise of a ruler that say nothing about the heroic struggle of simple people arouse a certain impatience in us. Everything is reduced to the archaic topos, the battle of two Giants, of whom the victorious one, King Wei that is, did not take part in any military operations and had a negligible influence on the course of events.

Painters did a much better job with the subject. Their panoramic canvases teem with wrestlers. The general mobilization is represented as a great dry forest on the horizon or a vast avalanche of sand. For the first time the people were depicted in a collective portrait, albeit a little abstractly, generally, like one of the elements.

After the magnificent victory King Wei fell into a state of excitement, a feverish euphoria that understandably disquieted the court. His mind teemed with ideas for quite outlandish reforms. He wanted to grant land to all the defenders of the homeland and give the most valiant of them titles, raising them to the level of state dignitaries. He also wondered whether it wasn't time for him to take over the helm himself and get rid of the hordes of bureaucrats, ministers, and courtiers at last.

Luckily the sober Mr. Dsou-Gi was in control of the situation. He patiently explained to the king that the era of great transformation belonged irrevocably to the past, for the subjects had reached such a degree of self-satisfaction and awareness that to cross that boundary could cause dangerous social unrest. "Both those who fell with your name on their lips and those who escaped intact," said Dsou-Gi, "are happy, for they took the country's fate on their shoulders for the first time in history. So you could say they governed along with you. And that is quite enough for them. A reward would be like a contemptuous alms-giving, or worse, could provoke them to rash acts." For the same reason he advised the king to dissolve the Ministry of Laments, strictly ban grumbling, which was becoming a perilous burden, and gradually return to the old tried and true methods of wielding power.

Irony, or actually the hand of fate, decreed that the period of Joyous Grumbling, also known as the Period of the Spring Flood, was ended not by the decrees of the good king Wei but by a sudden invasion by neighbors. This time the armies of three states—Yen, Dschou, and Han—attacked the Tsi kingdom. The only border not under threat was the border with the impassive sea. Despite the heroic defense effort, the outcome of the war was predetermined.

In the general confusion no one noticed what happened to Mr. Dsou-Gi, who was chiefly responsible for these misfortunes. It was clear to everyone that the experiments carried out by the king and his adviser had prompted the neighbors' military invasion. Mr. Dsou-Gi left the capital in a hurry, intending to head for the mountain monasteries where the philosophers of the Hundred Schools lived in ascetic devotion and contemplation. He hoped they would forgive him his mistakes and allow him to write a work in which he would disavow the Relentless Pulse of History and a few other heresies as well, in exchange for a modest board and the chance to survive the historical whirlwind. But on the way there he met a quick and almost painless death at someone's strong hands.

In those times of destruction and chaos, a man with a dubious reputation, a usurer and astrologer by profession named Dschan-Guo-Tse, became the person closest to the king. There's nothing odd about this. After all, not only rulers but ordinary people, at moments when all earthly calculations fail them, turn their eyes to the heavens, calling for the aid of supernatural forces. Dschan-Guo-Tse appeared at the palace every day, bringing horoscopes that corresponded almost exactly with fatal military communiques. Evil tongues held that the astrologer who so accurately foresaw the immediate future, possessed information of a very earthly kind, probably straight from army headquarters, over which the ultimate defeat hung suspended.

But who in those times would concern himself with the methodology of prediction. What mattered was that the astrologer—only he—knew how to escape from the hopeless situation. "King," said Dschan-Guo-Tse, "we can no longer

hope to save the country or your loyal subjects. We must rescue from the conflagration of our world the most precious thing—your head.

"Due east of Cape Shipwreck lies an uninhabited island. In fair weather one can sail there in three days. It is not a large island, but it is very fertile, the climate is mild, and it has the virtue of not existing on any map, like an undiscovered island that both exists and does not exist. It is forgotten by pirates, poets, and typhoons."

Hope dawned in the king's heart. He ordered a small fleet to be built, just a few ships, which were to bring to the new land only what was necessary—that is, a model of the future society—two peasant families, two artisan families, experts on silk cultivation, a doctor who was both a diviner and a rain man, some animals and essential tools.

Entirely excluded from that inventory were merchants, bankers, and artists (money and imagination are rightly considered the origin of many human misfortunes), as well as all ministers, bureaucrats, and courtiers. King Wei believed that finally he would be able to realize his beloved notion of direct government. He himself brought only his wife, one concubine, and of course the astrologer.

There is no certain knowledge of the expedition's fate. The passage of time and the lack of archaeological traces offer scope for the worst speculations. In the face of catastrophe one shouldn't look for possible suspects. It is, after all, a matter of complete indifference whether the fault lay in an astrologer's little mistake, or the ocean.

1981

THE GORDIAN KNOT

THE LANDSCAPE: A rocky plateau, the ground covered with small ash-colored stones, as if packs of rats had poured out onto the surface and been frozen motionless there; scattered groves of poplars—funeral processions—under a low leaden sky sending neither solace nor hope, and a wind, a ubiquitous wind mingled with sand—the relentless rising tide of an arid ocean.

The city: once prosperous and populous, it had fallen into a state of decomposition. Ruined houses and palaces in disrepair, clogged wells and cisterns, deserted streets and bazaars, and also the remains of an acropolis—a melancholy memento of past greatness. Only the walls still rose, high and proud, the unnecessary safeguard of oblivion and destitution.

Alexander of Macedonia spent the end of the winter and almost the whole spring of the year 333 in Gordion[1]. He always boasted that he was entirely indifferent to nature and caprices of the weather, but at that time his mood corresponded perfectly to the hopelessness of his surroundings. The situation was uncertain: bad news arrived on the movements of the Persian fleet, the enemy's intentions were hard to divine, and Alexander was waiting in vain for reinforcements from Greece without which he was condemned to slothful idleness.

Black thoughts came to him then. Premonitions, dreams, and suppressed voices told him that his liberation of the Greek cities in Asia, the great victory at the Granicus, everything he had thus far accomplished, was barely a prologue, and that the great epic would remain unfinished forever—and he who had set himself the modest task of conquering the world would shortly take his place in the dark vestibule of history crammed

with the countless crazed daredevils whom human memory had denied the right to greatness and glory passed on from generation to generation.

With the end of May finally came the welcome reinforcements made up of Macedonians and Greek allies. Alexander, bored with the long wait, decided to leave Gordion at once.

Before he left, however—such was the advice offered him—the leader ought to do something extraordinary, something that would heighten his authority and infuse the army with the conviction that the war they were embarking upon was in accordance with the gods' plans and therefore a holy war.

On all his expeditions Alexander was accompanied not only by doctors, courtesans, artists, and scholars but also by a full-time poet, an official historian and a soothsayer—an uncommonly important figure, who fulfilled two crucial functions: he was the ambassador of the gods, accredited by the conqueror's movable royal palace, and simultaneously minister of propaganda.

His prophecies, drawn from the flight of birds, the constellations of the stars and the innards of animals, always contained a hidden command: you must cross this wild and barren country, you must conquer the city on the mountain, you must win the battle. Alexander's task was to translate those metaphysical imperatives into the language of logistics and strategy. Both leader and seer were therefore intimately linked, like an idea and its realization, like a solid conclusion drawn from vague premises, like lightning and thunder.

At this momentous historical moment the soothsayer Aristander advised as follows: here in Gordion there's a curious object held in universal reverence for centuries, namely, the war chariot of Midas, the legendary king of Thrace. To the chariot shaft a knot is attached which no one has yet been able to untie. You must do it, Alexander!

Alexander listened to all this without enthusiasm, unable to understand why he was being forced to play a role worthy of a stable boy. So Aristander explained, referring to remote and

obscure genealogies, that Midas was a blood relation of the kings of Macedonia, in view of which untying the knot was in a certain sense a family obligation, and beyond that, a confirmation of blood ties! It should not be forgotten that Midas' chariot was dedicated to Zeus—Alexander's protoplast. "Operation Knot" might contribute to the strengthening of the ancient covenant between Greece and Asia. After all, this was not a matter of indifference to Alexander, who felt the role of liberator suited him better than that of invader and usurper.

It all sounded convoluted and unconvincing, so Aristander went to the heart of the matter and threw a decisive argument on the table. He announced proudly that he had devised the following prophecy:

HE

WHO UNTIES

THE GORDIAN KNOT

WILL BE

LORD OF GREECE

Of course—the seer went on—this was an imperfect version. The whole thing needed a thorough literary treatment. A prophecy should have the form of a distych combining a hexameter and a pentameter. The introduction of linguistic archaisms blunts the categorical nature of a sacred utterance and gives it the desired effect of ambiguity, in fitting with the semantics of the gods, who always express themselves aphoristically but not always clearly.

The troops should be told that prophecy is ancient, confirmed by the authority of many oracles. *Ex post* prophecies have been practiced by all peoples for centuries. A minor shift in time makes no difference to the gods, who do not concern themselves with any petty shopkeeper's reckoning of years, for their dwelling is the splendid, unbounded present.

If, on the other hand, for reasons difficult to foresee at that moment, the undertaking came to nothing, they could pretend the whole thing never happened. In that case Aristander, the

poet Choirilos, and the historian Callisthenes would pass it over in silence. So Alexander was going to face a mystery without running any risk of failure.

In the end Alexander remarked that the matter of the knot held an uncommon attraction for him. One cannot help being surprised that up to this point he had not found any practical application for the art of prophecy, interpretation of words or even the exegesis of difficult works of poetry.

The next morning Alexander, accompanied by a few generals and selected soldiers, set out for Midas' palace.

So there was the legendary chariot—unimpressive, shorn of ornament, falling apart with age and pious pawing—a silly worn-out piece of military junk. He spotted the dark-brown knot easily. He took it in both hands and found it to be a tangle of bast, heavy and solid like the clenched fist of a dead man.

The wrestling match with that inflexible and mysterious object began. At first Alexander tried to find one clear cord leading like Ariadne's thread to the center of the dark labyrinth. In vain. The knot mocked his efforts. Among those present one could hear a disenchanted murmur.

And then it happened. Alexander drew his sword and with one stroke cut the knot in two. A few cries—whether of admiration or disappointment is unclear. In fact no one realized the deeper meaning of that incident.

That night a tremendous snowstorm, unusual for that time of year, burst over the city. Lightning flashes lit up the darkness, heavy thunderbolts rolled across the sky. To Aristander it was a visible sign of the gods applauding Alexander's victory over the knot and his feat being to their liking. Aristotle on the other hand didn't like it at all.

The next day Alexander, relieved, left Gordion at the head of his troops.

A few weeks after the knot episode he received a letter from his master in Athens.

Alexander had previously read those letters as befits a pupil, with urgent attention and proper respect, but with the

passage of time the dialogue had broken off, the conversation had inevitably turned into a monologue. The philosopher gave an account of the problems he was working on. Alexander gave his position on the expanding map of the world and limited himself to brief information on himself, banal as a war communiqué.

The Stagirite[2], resident of a decaying provincial capital, a philosopher reflecting in the shade of small trees, could not understand his royal pupil, who hunted the fleeting ghost of Achilles without rest, driving infinite herds of mountains, deserts, and forests before him, riding a horse's back as if it were a wave, in measureless space, in limitless time no days or nights could contain, plunged in the clamor of battle and the hush of battle sites, striped with light and blinding blackness like a tiger.

Philosophers probably need a stable point of reference over the swirling ocean of phenomena. But an unmoving leader would be a figure as absurd as a square triangle.

The Greeks—Alexander thought—most often contented themselves with their own surroundings, the horizons of their homeland; they also had a curious tendency to look at the cosmos from the perspective of a vineyard and to draw far-reaching conclusions from modest experience. Who was it who said they resembled frogs huddled by the pond of the Mediterranean?

Alexander was at first pained and later merely irritated by the pedantic chill and unruffled pomp of the Stagirite's letters. If was as if there was no room in them for any heart's emotion, nor any admiration, pride, recognition for his pupil's extraordinary achievements. Sometimes it seemed as if the sage had lost his sense of humor, the distinctive mark of a sense of reality, when for example he wrote to his charge—then occupied in besieging a city—about the characteristics of odd numbers, the political system of Carthage, the theory of Nile waves, and the lives of bees.

Aristotle's letters usually contained three well-balanced parts, like the parts of a treatise. In the first part, the philosopher reported exhaustively on his work and scholarly

projects. Then followed requests for materials that might enrich his collection of specimens in the sphere of zoology, botany, and mineralogy, as well as—Aristotle's curiosity being truly inexhaustible—a demand for detailed information on all unusual natural phenomena and on the customs and beliefs of barbarian peoples. The letter ended with what might be called the ethical part, which contained stern reprimands, reflections on the subject of the ideal ruler, models of rational behavior buttressed with examples from the lives of great men.

This time, too, the philosopher played the role of pedagogue. He wrote that rumors had reached him (in Athens, where people relished gossip about any defeat suffered by the Macedonian) of the curious business of the Gordian knot and he had rightly inferred it to have been an unfortunate idea of Aristander's. He reminded Alexander that he had long advocated the dismissal of that unworthy adviser, who should be sent to settle down on a farm, although if the power of his muscles was equivalent to the power of his mind, it wouldn't do anyone any good. His fierce contempt for soothsayers struck sparks of sarcasm.

It's one thing, the Stagirite argued, to listen to irrational voices and views—we are all condemned to that—and a completely different thing to yield to them. Alexander faced an inevitable choice: either give up his inborn power of judgment and let himself be guided by the seer, in which case the glory of future actions would not fall to him—that blow was well-aimed and must have wounded Alexander—or act independently, directed by his own reason, which was his obligation as one of royal origin and great knowledge.

And now for the knot itself. Alexander was mistaken if he imagined he had risen to the level of the task (assuming even the minimal significance of that tasteless spectacle). The knot was supposed to be untied—not cut. Any mangy butcher could have cut it.

In closing, the philosopher asked Alexander not to give any publicity to the affair. Since even gods cannot alter the past, he could only count on kindly human forgetfulness.

It is a remarkable and disturbing thing that this unfortunate affair went on to have a great career in history. Individuals who wouldn't be able to say much about Alexander's true achievements, at the sound of the two magical words "Gordian knot," fall into a kind of doltish ecstasy, foam at the mouth, roll their eyes heavenward, smile approvingly. And that is precisely what is disturbing.

The Gordian knot became a common phrase, entered the linguistic storehouse of so-called civilized peoples. Worse, it advanced to the rank of a symbol. But a symbol of what? Cunning stealth, intellectual courage, the lightning transformation of idea into act, the supremacy of spirit over matter? No one among those who blithely blather on about it has tried to give an answer to these questions.

Six years after the incident in Gordion, Alexander crossed the threshold into mysterious India. At that time, as we know, it came to—or rather could have come to—the first confrontation between the Two Worlds, when near the town of Taxila he encountered the oddest people, who enjoyed universal reverence: naked philosophers, to whom the clever Greeks attached the name "gymnosophists." The news of them, included in chronicles, became legend in the centuries that followed.

One of the gymnosophists, whose name was Mandanis, is supposed to have said that Alexander was the first armed philosopher he had seen in his life. The Greeks took this as a refined compliment. But it seems to us an expression of astonishment, and perhaps even a politely veiled accusation.

This encounter of Two Worlds ended as do all international summits, namely with the participants and potential opponents parting fully convinced of the unshakable rightness of their own views. Language difficulties were no doubt a serious obstacle on the way to a true exchange of ideas. Alexander's army interpreters commanded only a crude vocabulary in foreign tongues and a clumsy soldier's grammar with its predilection for infinitives and imperatives, just right for requisitioning grain, fodder, and cattle, but not very helpful in conveying subtle shades of meaning.

There was a certain Onesikritos[3] in Alexander's retinue, a navy officer and amateur philosopher in one person. It is to him that we owe the account of the unsuccessful attempt to bring two great cultures closer together. For Onesikritos came to the conclusion that the Indian gurus were simply the counterpart to the Greek Cynics. That observation probably lifted his spirits, because he was a pupil of Diogenes and so the popularity of his master's doctrine on the edges of the world flattered his vanity. It is hard to find a more revealing example of intellectual arrogance, that is, translating what is mysterious and unknown into one's own terms and closing one's eyes to the world's splendid and instructive diversity. No one wished or was able to draw the real moral from the whole story, namely that the only clothing fit for a philosopher is defenseless nakedness.

In Gordion a lamentable, even reprehensible thing occurred. The tribunals of history treat this apparently trivial incident as a joke.

If the severing of the knot had been performed by one of the Oriental satraps, it would all have been understandable and clear, like an inscription on a rock declaring the tyrant's will to the desert in a murderous alphabet of arrows, hatchets, and swords. From Alexander one might have expected something in better taste.

After all, he realized very well, and even made sure that all his feats, his whole life, became to posterity an edifying fable, an example worth following, a paradigm. An incomprehensible blindness compelled him to introduce an element of force into the process of thought. How could he overlook the fact that the untying of knots and problems is not an athletic exhibition but an intellectual operation, which assumes the willingness to err, a helplessness before the tangled material of the world, marvelous human uncertainty, and humble patience.

Alexander, unable to cope with the task, destroyed the problem with a sword. We can say with a sigh of relief: it all happened a long time ago and will never happen again. But how do we know? The Gordian knot ceased to exist as a real

object, but it continues to exist, stubbornly, as an object of our imagination, a cognitive riddle. We cannot erase it from memory or exclude the possibility that in the very heart of that tangle so mistreated by the conqueror there was some important inscription, warning, wisdom, prayer, hope or even just a model of an ancient cosmology. Now no one can reconstruct the knot—for how could it be done? And that is painful beyond words. The Mystery was murdered.

With a heavy heart (for who did not love Alexander) we must admit that in some sense Alexander gave legitimacy to a certain repellent form of violence. The fact that in every century the Macedonian celebrates his shameful triumphs does not justify him. To him we apply the highest standards.

It is true that violence inflicted on persons differs from violence inflicted on objects, but in the end objects are our neighbors too and demand our care because they are deprived of the power of speech and the capacity for active resistance. And anyway, we don't know where the escalation of crime begins. Words scrawled on an innocent wall, the breaking of fragile windows, the desecration of cemeteries, burning of temples…The moment of transformation, the liberation of the ominous elements of violence is most often elusive.

That's why we can draw an analogy between Alexander's insane exploit and what took place later on a sunny beach in Sicily, when a Roman corporal unraveled the body of Archimedes, who had been drawing shapes and geometric figures in the sand which the simpleton couldn't understand.

And later on, too, those processions of darkness, burnings at the stake—of papyruses, pigskin manuscripts, books—stakes onto which disobedient authors were cast as if they were a mere afterthought.

1981

PACT

THE MELANCHOLY OF archaeology. Nowadays truly notable, revelatory discoveries occur only rarely. And what is worse, spiteful fate gave the great discoveries of the nineteenth century to wealthy amateurs; lucky fellows who dug with enthusiasm but blindly (Schliemann[1]), taking advantage of the fact that archaeology was a science in an embryonic state.

During one of my trips to Greece I happened to stumble upon an expedition that was excavating—if I remember rightly—somewhere in the environs of Corinth. A great big pit, and people were milling around on the bottom of the pit, delicately removing layers of earth with wire brushes. A large portion of the excavation had already been laid bare—a massive, not very attractive Roman theater.

On the edge of the pit stood a slender older gentleman—perhaps the head of the expedition—gazing mournfully down. Who knows, maybe he was dreaming just then of discovering some stone tablet with a priceless inscription. Early afternoon, the heat of the sun, drops of sweat ran down the gentleman's face and one of them stuck to the tip of his nose in the shape of a drop. I felt a wave of compassion; I wanted to go up to him and ask him on behalf of the great mass of archaeology lovers if the theater they were laboring over derived from Hadrian's time or was perhaps a slightly later construction. But I lacked the nerve.

Yes, yes. The work of people whom we naively envy for their dazzling adventures, their dialogue with the mysteries of the remote past, chiefly consists of tedious scratching around in the dirt, just to lay bare the foundations of a banal Roman villa lost on the edges of the *Imperium*, traces of a prehistoric settlement or a nameless city consumed by the desert, which

now looks like an enormous flat stone grate. Afterwards the research results will be registered in scholarly journals and supplied with sketches of horizontal and vertical elevation, topographical and altimetrical photos (the latter showing strata). All told in a dry language, devoid of emotion, as befits the anatomists of history.

Recently an Israeli expedition working near the town of Malhalla had that sort of unglamorous task: to determine the reach and character of the cultures of Natuf (the middle Stone Age). What do we know about the people of those distant times, apart from the fact that they battled hunger and thirst, and subsisted on hunting, fishing, and gathering. We can't even guess what their gods were like, or their magicians and leaders, what their great terrors, their great joys were—their dreams, loves, despairs. To us they're like a long-extinct species of fungus.

Well, the archaeologists found the settlement and a small burial ground. A row of square tombs, surrounded by stone and gravel—the monotonous layout of a military cemetery. There were well-preserved skeletons of children, adult men, women, elderly people—with their legs drawn up, their faces turned to the earth-covered sky. No sacred objects, say, a clumsily carved circle of the sun, no tools, not even a fistful of grain—dry provisions with which the dead were sent into their long eternity.

When it had already been decided to wrap up the siege on that poor necropolis, the group happened upon a tomb which on the map of the expedition bears the symbol W.III.27. The skeleton had been damaged (its crushed pelvis was a consequence of the removal of a heavy rock). The dead man reposed in the same position as the others, shinbones drawn up, left arm alongside the body, but his right arm rested in a gesture full of tenderness on the mortal remains of a five-month old puppy. The absent skin seemed to converse with the absent fur.

Naturally (though in fact it isn't natural at all) the finding did not become the sensation of the day. It's true that it was more modest than the discovery of Priam's treasure-house or

Tutanchamun's tomb, and in scholarly terms it yielded at most information on the early domestication of the wolf, which as we know finally went "to the dogs."

However, it would appear that an extraordinary, heartening, unexpected thing had happened: Stone Age man spoke to us in a whisper full of love. He affirmed the pact made twelve thousand years ago, a covenant more lasting than all the treacherous treaties of tyrants fallen into the dust of oblivion and scorn.

1981

PASSO ROMANO

YOU WOULD ONLY have to cover the caption under that photograph, and no one, but truly no one would see anything odd in the scene immortalized on the light-sensitive field, nothing to arouse concern or even common curiosity. Here you simply have a banal folk holiday, a procession in honor of a local patron, a bowling club meeting in the open air.

The foreground is clear, in the background one sees only blurred outlines of heads; in the foreground there is the figure of a young man dressed in a black shirt and breeches. He is holding a whip and gives the impression of a horseman who has just dismounted or fallen off a horse. Shifting our gaze from the left to the right side of the image, we see odd individuals, with something of low-ranking officers on leave, something of jugglers at a fair, all standing in a line as if on their marks for a cross-country race. An old dignitary with a long beard split like a Byzantine saint's and his chest strewn sequin-like with medals, a tall lean man with an extraordinarily lush sheeplike mane, a man in dark glasses with the mien of a dime-a-dozen gangster, and a handful of others with everyday faces.

In the center of that gathering, a familiar figure. But yes, it's him—Benito[1], the smith's son from Predappio, soon to be the idol of crowds, head of an *Imperium*, Scipio Africanus[2] and Julius Caesar in the paperback edition. Solidly built like a circus artist, handsome as a heroic tenor, he looks into the future with emptied-out eyes. His stuck-out chest is garlanded with a sash. On his feet he wears black half-boots, quite unsuited to a military expedition, and the white bootees of a provincial fop. Soon the summons will sound from the abyss, the overture of annihilation, and then they will set off.

One may reasonably reproach the Director of the Solar System, the Lord of the Clouds. He should at this precise moment, when it's not yet too late, send down some inferior angel who with one crack of the whip, one lion-tamer's shout, would drive this rabble back into the cage. As we know, it happened otherwise.

A crime in its embryonic state does not instill terror in anyone. The beginnings of evil are always ridiculous, trivial, like a dumb joke; they wear the guise of innocence.

It is virtually certain that the historic photograph we have made an effort to describe will be met by our heirs with a careless shrug, and its demonic dimensions will evaporate forever. And that—in the name of holy pedagogy—is understandable. Children should be raised to worship goodness and beauty, and the fairy tales of the Grimms—those gloomy ruffians—should be cut from their reading lists, teenagers should be given Dostoevsky thinned with water, and we should excerpt from history only what is edifying.

Unfortunately, another image has been preserved, executed with the same technical apparatus a quarter-century after the first. It represents the shameful epilogue to the escapade. Even if all historic documents and sources were suppressed, teachers of lofty ideals would not be able to protect their pupils from a suffocating sense of the absurd, for the contrast between those two scenes—between the innocent beginning and the cruel end—is truly beyond the endurance of the pure in heart.

Why do we—victims of enslavement—to whom it was given to witness the dark spectacle of humiliation and atrocity, why do we soften with the years? Sober judgment and lucid condemnation yield to quiet resignation. If I remember rightly, we made no pact with fate to keep a grateful silence if we managed to survive. So where does that reluctance, that feeling of embarrassment come from when our memory touches on those times? Called before a Tribunal to give testimony to the whole truth as the last eyewitnesses, we stutter horribly, muddle our statements, mix up dates, the sequence of events, the guilty seem hardly real to us, more fools than fiends, and when we go from the courtroom into the

hallway, patting our sweaty brows with a handkerchief, we think: what's all this for, it's high time to be done with this masochism; in the end the only ones with the right to complain are the murdered. It is very bad, disastrous, when witnesses look at their own past in disbelief and are afraid to utter the words that what happened was not at all inevitable, that it could have been avoided with a modicum of collective imagination.

Human memory is like a scribe laboriously setting down letters while his left hand erases the text of the past. Every generation knocks together its own apocalypse and utopia and, confident in its own powers, believes its utopia and apocalypse will come off exceptionally well, unlike any other, will be final.

Against the rules of ancient poetics, the satyr play came before the tragedy; the second, final photograph is truly macabre. It moves us to pity and disgust. The body of the leader who stood at the head of the procession, an athletic, powerful body, but devoid of life, hangs on the flagpole of a gas station, head down. That is his ultimate mockery of a speaker's platform. He was stretched out there an hour before midnight on April 28, 1945, at Piazza Loreto in Milan—and so not far from the place where the march began. The circle had been closed.

But had it really? We would like to think so. But what to do with that curious psychic mechanism in us that makes the origins of evil merely a source of lighthearted amusement, whereas the end, always cruel and bloody, makes honest souls strew oblivion's dry flowers on the graves of the authors of catastrophe?

1986

SINOPE

IN ANTIQUITY SINOPE was a Greek colony laid out on the shore of the Black Sea, and in the course of its tumultuous history it passed successively into the hands of the Persians, the Macedonians, the King of Pontus[1], Rome and Byzantium, finally becoming a Turkish city of a few thousand inhabitants. Nothing indicated that it would enter human language, that is to say human memory. The city's name became the synonym for a kind of paint and for a specific process in painting—on which more in just a moment.

When I think of *sinope* I think of Pisa and its square of Miracles—its splendid ensemble of Romanesque religious architecture, emerging from the thick grass of the white Baptistery, the Cathedral and Leaning Tower and the Campo Santo—a closed area where they strewed holy earth from Golgotha, brought to Pisa in the time of the crusades—so the dead would be nearer to heaven. On the left hand, if you face the Cathedral, there is the only museum of sinopes in the world. It has its origins in a dramatic event of the last war.

It is a hot afternoon toward the end of July 1944. Things are nearing an end in the Italian theater of war. The allies on the Ligurian coast are trying to silence the German artillery on the left bank of the Arno. A badly-aimed shot, and a stray grenade hits the Campo Santo. The building collapses in a cloud of smoke.

The locals act to put out the fire in extremely adverse circumstances, under gunfire and in the absence of a water supply. During the feverish rescue of frescoes, the layer underneath is laid bare, representing drawings—sinopes. They were sketches drawn directly on the walls, the first phase in the creation of a wall painting.

This raises the question of why the artists of the thirteenth century did not use paper for this purpose, as did the painters of the Renaissance—Raphael, for example. Well, paper was expensive in those days, so they made their sketches directly on the wall, then covered them with paint. The fresco technique required very rapid decisions and execution. The paint dried quickly on the wall surface and made any correction impossible. So this was a blessing in disguise. The fire in Campo Santo allowed us to deepen our knowledge of the technique of the thirteenth century painters, to discover something that was supposed to remain hidden to us—forever.

1990

DAVID

DAVID WAS BORN into a wealthy family of merchants and artisans in the district of Saint-Antoine in Paris. From childhood onward he wanted to be a painter and only a painter, and he became one, the most renowned painter of eighteenth-century France.

After his studies he is awarded the Prix de Rome and travels to the dreamt-of Eternal City for a longer period of study, following the artists of that time, to complete his education.

But heaven turns out to be a hell. The thousands of churches and bas-reliefs crush the young artist with their stony weight. He cannot distinguish a copy from an original, a valuable from a valueless thing—for no one can—nor can he place that vast quantity of ancient works in time. He reads Winckelmann, copies marble sculptures and is in despair.

Nevertheless, he paints his first classic work—*Brutus*, an exaltation of love of the fatherland. Brutus condemns to death two of his sons accused of treason. The scene shows the somber hero of the "holy crime" in the foreground, the two bodies carried home by lictors and a group of despairing women. A painting of large dimensions, life-sized figures; the severe, bitter coloring gives the story a dark majesty.

From Rome David returns to Paris. He is now a recognized artist and receives portrait commissions from the aristocracy; it must be said that his full mastery is revealed not in his huge canvases but precisely in these portraits. The big scenes make a big impression and are lauded, the portraits are more modest and always excellent.

The Revolution erupts and David throws himself body and soul into the whirlwind of revolutionary events. He is given a state commission for the celebration of the oaths in the Jeu de Paume[1]—the memorable event universally regarded as the beginning of the revolutionary changes. The painting was never finished.

Elected a member of the National Assembly, he devotes himself enthusiastically to its work: he battles against the Academy of Fine Arts as the seat of aristocratic artists, plans national celebrations and burials of heroes, works in the police division of the Assembly, speaks eagerly, emphatically and without talent. He paints little.

His best painting from that period is *Marat.* The people's friend, murdered by a young woman. His naked body lies in a bathtub, his head wrapped in a towel, the unmoving pen of the defender of human rights in his dead hand. It is the most magnificent icon of revolution.

After Robespierre's downfall his friend David is arrested and briefly imprisoned.

Napoleon appears, greeted with enthusiasm by David—who becomes the Emperor's painter. He paints a portrait of him on horseback at the moment of crossing the Saint Bernard Pass (in fact the god of war crossed the pass on an ox) and the famous coronation, a huge painting with dozens of life-sized figures, so large you could ride a horse around in it.

Napoleon's downfall. David has to leave France, he is after all a regicide (he voted for the decapitation of Louis XVI). He settles in Brussels in an aura of fame, surrounded by pupils. He paints portraits and mythological scenes promising a new era. He dies the most celebrated painter in Europe, in a blaze of success. He is eighty years old.

What to say of this artist, who has been called the Raphael of the *sansculottes*? He displayed no Roman hardiness in life and often changed his convictions. But he remained true to his art.

Must an artist be a hero, or is it sufficient that he paint heroes?

1990

ALTICHIERO

THE WHOLE BUSINESS borders on a scandal. With the exception of a few specialists, virtually no one knows Altichiero's name, and it is difficult really to say what is the reason for the neglect.

It may be because the corpus of his works is small, because he worked as if in the shadow of Giotto's powerful personality. Whatever the causes, we must finally break the conspiracy of silence.

Not much is known about Altichiero's life, and his main body of work is in one place in Padua, in the basilica of San Antonio and the nearby oratorium of San Giorgio. He worked with the painter Avanzo[1] and it is hard to distinguish what is his from what came from Avanzo's brush.

In the terrible Basilica of San Antonio in Padua, which is like a holy circus, the one chapel that inclines a visitor to contemplation is decorated with frescoes by Altichiero representing the Crucifixion.

How the master managed to create serious, exalted, outstanding work amid the surrounding funfair of color will remain his secret. An Altichiero fresco is original through and through. Its power resides not merely in the composition or the artistic means employed but chiefly in its spiritual force, unequaled among other artists of the trecento.

The cross in the center, around it the figures of horses and a crowd of onlookers. It is a crowd entirely indifferent to the event, like an ordinary village gathering—a woman tugging a child by the arm, on the left, soldiers casting lots for Christ's garments. It is reminiscent of Brueghel, who came so much

later, and his method of portraying important events against the backdrop of an indifferent human landscape.

The frescoes in the San Giorgio oratorium languished in a state of utter decay for centuries (in Napoleon's time it was used as a stables). They are a great cycle of knightly stories from the life of Saint George, and they also contain scenes of the martyrdom of Saint Clare and Saint Catherine. Giotto stems entirely from the Franciscan spirit, not only because he is the illustrator of the legend of St. Francis, but also in his essence—the somewhat sweet, feminine spirit of the *Poveretto.* Altichiero on the other hand comes from the spirit of Dante—stern, knightly, metaphysical.

It often happens that a great discovery in the sphere of art history is the work of writers, not historians. That was the case with the discovery of the superb Dutchman Vermeer, which was made by a French journalist and writer in the nineteenth century.

I have tried my strength so that Altichiero might finally be granted his proper place among the most excellent of artists. And belated fame.

1990

FOR THE ROAD

1. WHAT DO we give a boy going off to school for the first time, a boy with a face spotted with freckles, still wavering between the warm family den and the icy, alien breath of the world? The boy tries to escape into a dream, struggles through the thicket of childhood along white paths of delight and anxiety to the Realm of Gentle Giants, but his mother's long, powerful fingers extract him from the cocoon and strap on his little boots with his white knee-socks and blue uniform—a visible sign that from now on he will serve. On his back, rattling mysteriously as if a family of mice lived in it, is a real oilcloth school-bag.

They stand in the open doorway and with a somewhat ceremonial gesture the mother puts into the boy's coat pocket a paternal handkerchief smelling of starch and the steam iron, so that he may cover his face with it, for nobody from now on must see his fear when he is overcome with despair.

2. What do we give a girl going off to her first ball, to the great ceremony of initiation into a three-fourths rhythm, to a lottery whose stake is life, to that hall festooned with colored lights, full of the wailing of violins, the laughter of the xylophone and the hearty assent of the drum and bass?

Mother gives the girl a batiste handkerchief with a monogram, a white scrap of thick cloth made of silk and mist, asking her never to part with it.

So the girl holds the batiste handkerchief like a spray of elderblossom when she dances, presses it to her burning cheeks; at times it trembles in her extended hand like a call for help.

When she steps out on the terrace with her most faithful dancing partner, to take in a little moonlight, she touches the

hankie to her lips to whisper away that terrible word her sweaty boy isn't ready to hear, unprepared as he is for chains, quite happy with what fate is doing with him right now.

In a corner of the hall filled with the noise of lights, sparkling with hope, three black witches are throwing dice for the girl's batiste handkerchief, and her head.

3. What do we give that young man—a hunter with thick stubble on his face who has come by his home for a moment buttoned up tight in his uniform? He moves clunkily, with a jangling noise.

Well, he has got involved in an adventure intended as a jolly morning shooting party, a contest of youthful bravery, a jump onto a horse, a jump across a stream in pursuit of the indescribable, precious taste of victory. It was only supposed to last a few days, but in the meantime—Mother looks at his stranger's eyes withdrawing to the back of his head. She is silent. The rifle in the corner inhibits conversation.

So she wraps an image of the Mother of mothers—an oval pocket-sized relief made of mother-of-pearl—in a starched and clean peasant handkerchief; an item full of good intention and insufferable color. She puts the little viaticum in the pocket of his uniform. Maybe he'll keep it safe. And if he doesn't, it will help them to identify him and carry him back home in a pine box on a wagon.

1997

THOMAS

WE DON'T KNOW whether Thomas got it from the Greeks —which is profoundly doubtful—or whether his doubt was an inborn character trait. Skepticism is a certain cast of mind.

When the Master appeared for the second time among the Apostles at supper, Thomas demanded an autopsy. The marks on the hands were from his point of view only a secondary proof; he directed his full attention to the wound in the side.

The scar was relatively fresh. The wound inflicted with a sharp instrument between the seventh and eighth rib was three fingers wide. Its regular shape was reminiscent of a mouth, a silent mouth, and had beyond all doubt been inflicted by an expert with a sure, dry stab, removing the spear blade by the same path immediately after the blow was dealt, without causing additional tearing of the skin or effusion.

Thomas approached the wound cautiously with his long indicator finger, as if entering a lion's den. With his fingertip he examines its depth, the vault and shape of the walls. It resembled, as we have said, a mouth open in a cry. The whole time Thomas' face was tense, full of a cold ecstasy. His wrinkled brow was like an evenly ploughed field. He was master of the empirical.

Caravaggio drenched the scene in golden light and bronze shadow thick as a bear's fir, but in fact it was all done as if in the middle of a laboratory, in garish light flayed of all skin, like tin white with the addition of ethereal blues and yellows.

When Thomas was dying, his lips were moving constantly and his pupils thought he was praying and confessing his sins, especially the greatest of sins, lack of faith.

When one of the pupils bent over him, he heard that Thomas, called Didimos, was counting.

1997

EVIL[1]

1. MY FIRST encounter with evil.

By all means.

It is 1926, in Rymanów[2]. Summertime: in the early morning I went out by myself (escaping from the house) heading for the garden of Dr. Tarnawski. On the way back, on the path (a bright ocher), the black fur of a mole. I realize the mole is dead, though I don't really realize what that means, dead.

Dead, and thus evil. So much for the first encounter, which was based on an image, and thus on seeing, which is not subject to intellectual measures—induction and deduction. 2. So I went on living without any metaphysical conflict over the fact that both evil and good exist in the world, battling each other; to me it wasn't a scandal or a paradox, a painful absurdity, or something that attacks the very essence of God, His omnipotence. 3. Philosophy is not only a theory of everything, but also and above all a practical indication of how to live. Now one may live, albeit not very comfortably, with a shallow consciousness. On the condition that it is not a solution but a Cartesian method of building temporality.

Evil always appeared to me as embodied evil, always *with a human face.*

The practicality of that point of view:

a) It is easy to recognize,

b) It is easy to point out and consequently to choose what is good and reject what is evil. Moral life is a set of practical problems, not theoretical ones,

c) Whoever grumbles about the difficulty of choosing, simulates and plays up an intellectual malaise while in fact he lacks character, the ability to make a choice according to one's moral being. That being is, as it were, given by nature, it connects us to the structure of the universe and in particular the world of human beings and animals.

This much in brief, but by God and the truth, there is no need to go on about it or write fat tomes; one must exercise good will, for that way we spare ourselves and our neighbors much suffering.

1998

A WORD FOR THE POETRY EVENING AT THE NATIONAL THEATER, MAY 25, 1998[1]

I

POLISH POETRY, ABOUT WHICH I'd like to say a few words here, was born in kingly chambers with the marks of strength, simplicity, and dignity. Its birth means the arrival into the world of Jan Kochanowski, who was outstanding *from the start*, not as the result of a complex play of influences, cultural meanings, but spontaneously, distinctly, once and for all and irrevocably.

The poet writes in Roman stone, in a very clear and serene hand, and there are in him all the sounds of this earth: the first words spoken to his mother: "This is your son. You see, he's quiet, he doesn't scream or complain like the others. He will be bound to us by a secret pact of fidelity."

O white-winged sea-swimmer,

Child of high Ida,

Beechen boat

II

FRANCISZEK KARPIŃSKI, MY COUNTRYMAN in the most *literal* sense, is unjustly counted among the *poetae*

minores. Our summer house on the outskirts of Lvov was two kilometers from Hołoskow (please note the gutteral H in the name), the birthplace of Karpiński[2], who was educated at the Jesuit Academy in Lvov, later Jan Kazimierz University. Now, it is my profound conviction that Franciszek Karpiński was a great poet—please note down the irrevocable word.

The stuff of his word is a whisper of dew falling at dawn
the delicate speech of a stream
the speech of rain falling on the branches of trees
the piercing speech of midday
the still bell of the mezzogiorno
the dense matter of dusk
when pine-trees on the hill covertly signal to the evening
and that terrible silence of the moon and the nightingale

Karpiński knows those voices as does no one else, he uses them both stringently and copiously, at once sentimentally and with classical restraint, for the characteristic mark of the master is god-like equilibrium, and we, imitators, now speak with a mixture of seriousness, frivolity, loftiness and the common things gathered in the meadows, fields, and forests of this world. He is extraordinarily refined, like a queen playing at being a shepherdess in the gardens of Versailles. It is the business of art to reconcile the sublime with the vulgar, the great with the small. And in that speech we do nothing but that, we reconcile the mysterious with the comical.

Goodnight Jacenta,[3]
and you, virgin mouth,
and eyes so tender,
and paired breasts of down!

After the loss of his fatherland he drags himself from one princely garden to another, crazed and yet conscious, like Reytan in a soldier's headgear from the time of the Great Principality, with a peacock feather behind his ear and a teardrop which, unable to fall from his nose, shines.

Goodnight Jacenta,

and you, virgin mouth,

and eyes so tender,

and paired breasts of down!

III

JULIUSZ SŁOWACKI WAS ALSO from the farthest outlying territories, namely from Armenia, through his Mother's Mother. He wanders elegantly around Paris with a red rose in his heart and a pistol loaded with sorrow for the mother from whom he is parted.

He carried verse to *unattainable* heights

gave it an unparalleled shine and radiant glimmer

a flight like a comet

flung across the sky

he takes ages off mountains

holds abysses in his hands

In a wartime massacre, a little episode, or icon. General Sowiński leaning on the altar *on that wooden leg*.

In a little old church in Wola[4]
General Sowiński remained
an old man with a wooden leg

IV

A monument to a wanderer, the very idea of wandering.

I was in the house of Saint Kazimierz in Paris
an institute for *orphans and a veteran*
for the orphans of all battles

Old
if you can say that of an awkward old man
haughty
if the expression fits an awkward old fellow
always in a fever
always at the mercy of poverty
but nevertheless haughty and proud
which the Russians hated in their younger brothers the Poles

A coat rack on which someone absentmindedly crucified a man.

He always returns late at night, tipsy on cheap Calvados, humming:

C'est une chanson[5]

Qui nous ressemble

Toi, tu m'aimais

Moi, je t'aimais

One night a nun, whom we will call Gudula, scolds him for his improper behavior. Without a word Norwid dumps a urinal on her head.

"Was it full, do you think?" asks Józef Czapski, my painter friend.

"Sure it was."

"And how did he dump it, upside down?"

"Sure. He was an honest man, wasn't he?"

Rich as a polar sunrise the wanderer's spectrum of color

Hunger

Thirst

Dirt

Fleas

Evangelical poverty

in his heart

Unhappy Love

Vain Journey

On his heart he carries his Vade mecum like a millstone. A philosopher-poet in a country where *every thought comes too late.*

Norwid's word

made of fire

iron

artillery guns

sword and armor

the posthumous laurel—the only one worth the labor

Why, Shade, do you depart, hands broken on your shield,[6]

What is that playing with sparks in your lap, by torchlight?—

The sword green with laurel, bathed in the candles' tears,

The eagle soars and your horse lifts its feet like a dancer.

V

TADEUSZ GAJCY[7]. NORWID'S CLOSEST relative, most certainly, that late descendant who does not pass by the written word indifferently. His poetry is the stuff of fiery prophetic dreams.

I write—as a gravedigger chooses a pit[8]

for a body's stillness, a hand's despair

and sometimes a little word rises there

like a cross or a wreath.

VI

The changing of the guard

so near

I feel their breath in my neck

I had to take my place in the relay race

Krzysztof Kamil Baczyński[9]

A generation stupidly called the Columbus generation.

Although it's no great discovery—and that's precisely what they were writing about—this banal discovery of death, when their souls longed for life, adventure, God and truth.

Baczyński comes almost wholly out of the spirit of Słowacki.

A misty world

seen through the bloody dust of battles

painful as glass in the eye

at times too metaphorical

racing on the lathered surface of images

Both of them, Baczyński and Gajcy, fell in August 1944, defending the ruins of Warsaw. *On the day of their deaths they*

were twenty-two years old. Both cadets.

I

survived not in order to live

you have little time,

you must give testimony

And as for me, who invited you to this Kaddish, I would like it to be not a Kaddish but a gift

when the time draws near

I would like to say of myself, always balancing between sublimity and absurdity, after my master Słowacki:

[...]

I've left no heir here on earth behind me,[10]

neither for my lute, nor for my name;

my name passed like lightning and will be

for generations a sound devoid of fame.

[...]

Let my friends gather round at midnight

and burn my heart ceremonially in aloe,

and give it back to the one who gave it—

in ashes: the world repays all mothers so

[...]

I implore the living not to lose their faith

but bear before the people enlightenment's torch

and when called, may they go to their death

like stones flung by God upon the rampart!...

[...]

I will, however, leave that fateful power,

vain to me in life, a wreath for my temples;
when I die it will work unseen, hour by hour
to turn you, eaters of bread, into angels.

1998

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[*] Herbert adds at the foot of the page: “When I was visiting my ailing mother.”

* *Myth and Reality,* 1963.

* There is another method of dating archeological finds. It is based on the measurement of the C14 isotope contained in plant and animal fossils. The analysis of carbon found in the Lascaux caves made it possible to date the origin of the wall paintings to thirteen thousand years B.C. Archeologists, however, move the date back several millennia.

[*] In fact there is only one *donzella*, who cleans the rooms, makes the beds, and in the evenings inspects the torn sheets, embroidering sad songs with her voice, thin as a needle. (Herbert's note.)

[*] So-and-so many meters taller than the Signoria in Florence, boast the guides. Italians are completely crazy about their spires, just as Americans are crazy about cars. For both it is a matter of prestige. San Gimignano—the Tuscan Manhattan—has sixty spires, though the town could be hidden in a giant's fist. Florence has approximately one hundred and five spires. (Herbert's note.)

[*] Jaufre Rudel writes: "…I have a friend, but I do not know who she is, and, on my soul, I have never seen her…although I love her so much. There is no greater happiness for me than to possess a remote love."

* Evans had not yet invented the term “Minoan civilization,” but from the very beginning he realized he had found traces of a culture older than the one Schliemann had plundered.

** In Egyptian tombs inscriptions and murals were found which some scientists believe refer to the Minoans. These paintings portray people dressed in non-Egyptian clothes. They carry tribute vases and dishes—whose shape and ornamentation correspond quite exactly with the Cretan ceramics in its later period. One of the inscriptions says: “Great leader from Kefti and the islands (or coasts) of the Green Sea.” But as to whether Kefti means Crete and its inhabitants, not all scientists agree.

* The division and characterization of Minoan ceramics given here are naturally very schematic and do not reflect the whole wealth of this art and craft.

[*] There are eternal problems with the conversion of the currency of remote historical periods. Drachmas and talents sound abstract to us. We know that 100 drachmas made a mina, and 60 minas one talent. The Athenian drachma weighed a little over 4 grams, and its value is judged to be a fifth of an American dollar. A slave cost 150 to 300 drachmas, and brought in an average annual revenue of 60 drachmas (a slave was hired out for an obol a day). However, I don't know if these calculations throw any light on what Athenian money could buy.

* Here it is worth adding that the personal estates of Athenians were extraordinarily modest; nothing in comparison with Roman fortunes. The exceptions were a few Athenian "Croesuses" who exploited the Laurion mines—they owned property worth hundreds of talents. In his *Lives of the Philosophers*, Diogenes Laertius mentions the testament of Plato, a wealthy aristocrat as we know, who besides two small real estate plots left his heirs four slaves and a little over 8 minas in so-called cash, objects of silver, and "capital" which it seems was lent at a percentage.

[*] Poor Pericles, and this dream of his was only partially fulfilled. The "pan-Athenaia" never became a general Hellenic holiday. The Greeks preferred poor apolitical cities with age-old traditions to Athens: Olympia, Delphi. The holiday that was truly popular was not the too lofty, too stage-managed pan-Athenaia but the lewd, coarse folk holiday of the Great and Small Dionysus, reminiscent in its character to the medieval *Fête des fous*—that obscene hermetic carnival tolerated by the Church, with its mock Pope and its wagon portraying the triumph of Bacchus drawn by naked Centaurs and Centauresses in the company of Great Pan.

[*] During the building of the Parthenon, one might add, Sophocles, a friend of Pericles, was the chairman of the financial committee which was occupied with the economy of the League's treasury.

* We know that Anthony—that unrivaled bon vivant—was in Athens in 39 B.C. and that his vows to Athena were taken then amid great pomp (perhaps on the Acropolis). On that occasion the Roman general tricked the Athenians out of a "statue" worth 4 million sesterces. Pure cynicism or political gamesmanship? Probably the latter, as Anthony also (in accordance with his character) identified himself with Dionysus, at the same time "nicknaming" Cleopatra Aphrodite. These mythological spiels were necessary to the resuscitation of Alexander the Great's idea: to link Europe and Asia.

[*] In the second half of the eighteenth century, toward the end of Turkish rule, Athens counted barely three thousand Turks and five thousand Greeks.

[*] Here and there one encounters in European museums soldiers' "souvenirs" from this expedition. So in Copenhagen one finds heads of a Lapita and a Centaur, dragged here by Captain Hartmand.

[*] The album of Makryannis, contemporary with the events, contains a painted history of the rebels fighting; the album is kept in the museum of the capital with the reverence due to national relics. It is a Greek equivalent of the *images d'Épinal*[33]. Naïve, melodramatic narrative painting, which elicits a gentle smile from a modern viewer more than anything else. European Romantic painters, especially the French, took up the theme of the rebellion with unequaled theatrical force, with all their grandiloquence and sense of drama and danger, giving vent to emotion, but also glowing tans and cobalts.

* In the Athenian museum of history and ethnography there are wooden busts of famous men of Antiquity which decorated the prows of rebel ships. Themistocles or Solon with great big noses and menacing bandits' moustaches have little in common with their classical Greek portraits. They remind one rather strongly of wild Cretan shepherds and pirates.

* “Why the Classics”: see Collected Poems 1956–1998, “Apocryphas: The Mercy of the Executioner”.

[1] *"Si Altamira…":* If Altamira is the capital of the art of wall painting, Lascaux is its Versailles.

[2] *"Ici vécut Marie Martel…":* Here lived Marie Martel—midwife and officer of the Academy. Her life…was doing good. Her joy…to accomplish her duty.

[3]*L'abbé Breuil:* Henri Breuil (1877–1961), French archaeologist, ethnologist, geologist, and priest noted for his studies of cave art in the Somme and Dordogne valleys as well as in Spain, Portugal, Italy, Ireland, China (with Teilhard de Chardin), Ethiopia, Somaliland, and Southern Africa.

[4]*Sieroszewski:* Wacław Sieroszewski (1858–1945), Polish writer and soldier. For activities subversive of the Russian Empire, he spent much of the 1880s and 1890s in Siberian exile, where he wrote fiction and did ethnographic research on the Yakut, the largest native people of Siberia.

[5] *Avesta:* or Zend Avesta [Persian: commentary on the law], scripture of the Zoroastrian religion, consisting of the Yasna, a liturgy with songs (Gathas) the Vispered, a supplement to the Yasna, the Yashts, hymns of praise, and the Videvdat, a code of ritual purification.

[6]*Bushman artists:* the San, a people of southern Africa, with a highly developed artistic culture. The San resisted the encroachments of Dutch settlers in the 18th and 19th centuries, but by the 1860s had been effectively crushed.

[7]*Piltdown skull:* a palaeontological hoax; fragments of a human skull and orangutan jawbone collected in 1912 from a gravel pit at Piltdown, a village in East Sussex, England, and thought by many experts to be the remains of an unknown form of early man—given the name *Eoanthropus dawsoni* ("Dawson's dawn-man," after the collector)—until exposed as a forgery in 1953.

[1] *"The only harmony..."*: paraphrase of Aristotle, *Politics*, Book VIII, 1340a/b:… pieces of music on the contrary do actually contain in themselves imitations of character;…so that people when hearing them are affected differently and have not the same feelings in regard to each of them, but listen to some in a more mournful and restrained state…and to others in a softer state of mind, but in a midway state and with the greatest composure to another, as the Dorian mode alone of tunes seems to act…(trans. B. Jowett)

[2]*Pythagoreans of Croton:* Pythagoras founded his school at Croton in Calabria c. 530 B.C. and they acquired great influence with the supreme council of one thousand by which Croton was ruled. In 510 B.C. Croton sent an army of one hundred thousand men to destroy its rival Sybaris.

[3]*Metapontum:* important city of Magna Graecia, situated on the gulf of Tarentum. The ruins of Metapontum are located in the Basilicata region of Italy.

[4]*Battle of Cannae:* major battle of the Second Punic War, August 2, 216 B.C. near the town of Cannae in Apulia in southeast Italy, where the army of Carthage under Hannibal decisively defeated a numerically superior army of the Roman Republic.

[5] *aoidos:* bard, poet

[6]*Vitruvius:* Marcus Vitruvius Pollio (c. 80–70 B.C., died after c. 15 B.C.) was a Roman writer, architect, and engineer active in the 1st century B.C.

[7]*Kant's view of geometry:* in his *Critique of Pure Reason* and *Prolegomena*, Kant argues the truths of geometry are synthetic (not analytic) truths, relying on an element of intuition or sensibility.

[8] *Alberti:* Leon Battista Alberti (1404–1472), Italian author, artist, architect, poet, priest, linguist, philosopher, cryptographer, and general Renaissance humanist polymath.

9 *"Nestor, the aged lord…":* from *The Iliad*.

10 *"biferi rosaria Paesti":* slightly misquoted from Virgil, *Georgics*, Book 4:119; "biferique rosaria Paesti," twice-blooming roses of Paestum.

[1]*the VI Legion:* the Legio Sexta Ferrata (Sixth Ironclad Legion), a Roman Legion formed in 65 B.C., and in existence up to at least 215 A.D. It served under Julius Caesar in the Gallic Wars (58–51 B.C.), and in various civil wars; temporarily disbanded in 45 B.C., it established a colony at Arles.

[2]*Barbegal:* The Barbegal aqueduct and mill is a Roman watermill complex located on the territory of the commune of Fontvieille, near Arles.

[3]*Foch:* Ferdinand Foch (1851–1929) general in the French army during World War I, Marshal of France from 1918 and then supreme commander of the Allied armies, until the armistice.

[4]*Emperor Honorius:* Flavius Honorius (384–423), Roman Emperor (393–395) and then Western Roman Emperor from 395 until his death. He was the younger son of Theodosius I.

[5] *"Dans Arles, ou sont les Alyscamps…":* from a poem by Paul-Jean Toulet (1867–1920), poet, novelist, translator, and descendant of Charlotte Corday.

[6]*Gamaliel:* or Rabbi Gamaliel I, a leading authority in the Sanhedrin in the mid 1st century. In the Christian tradition, celebrated as a Pharisee doctor of Jewish Law and teacher of the apostle Paul.

[7]*Mistral:* Frederic Mistral (1830–1914), Occitan writer and lexicographer of the Occitan language who won the Nobel Prize in literature in 1904.

[8]*Pan Tadeusz:* epic poem depicting the country life of the Polish-Lithuanian nobility, by Polish Romantic poet Adam Mickiewicz (1798–1855)

[1]*Robbe-Grillet:* (1922–2008), Alain Robbe-Grillet, French Nouveau Roman writer and filmmaker.

[2]*Pisano:* Andrea Pisano (1290–1348), also known as Andrea da Pontedera, Italian sculptor and architect. In 1347 he became Master of the Works at Orvieto Cathedral. His two sons, Nino and Tommaso, both succeeded him as Master of the Works.

[3] *Orcagna:* Andrea di Cione di Arcangelo (c. 1308–1368), better known as Orcagna, was an Italian painter, sculptor, and architect active in Florence. A student of Andrea Pisano.

[4]*Sanmicheli:* Michele Sanmicheli (1484–1559) was a Venetian architect. In 1509 he went to Orvieto, where he practiced for two decades.

[5]*Luca Signorelli:* (c. 1445–1523), painter noted for his ability as a draughtsman and his use of foreshortening. His massive frescoes of the *Last Judgment* (1499–1503) in Orvieto Cathedral are considered his masterpiece.

[6]*Pinturicchio:* Bernardino di Betto, called Pintoricchio or Pinturicchio (1454–1513), Italian painter of the Renaissance born in Perugia.

[7]*Perugino:* Pietro Perugino (1446–1524), born Pietro Vannucci in Città della Pieve, Umbria, a leading painter of the Umbrian school.

[8]*coro dei dottori:* choir of doctors of the Church.

[9]*Bramante:* Donato Bramante (1444–1514), Italian architect most famous for the design of St. Peter's Basilica in Rome.

[10]*Bentivoglia:* Antonio Bentivoglia, Italian jurist (d. 1435).

[11]*Matejko's "Battle of Grunwald":* 1878 work by Polish painter Jan Matejko (1838–1893) depicting the 1410 Polish and Lithuanian victory over the Teutonic Knights; an icon of Polish nationalism.

12 *“Zweifelhaft”:* doubtful.

[1] *milites et mercatores sieneses:* Sienese soldiers and merchants.

[2]*che fece l'Arbia…:* Dante, *Inferno*, Canto X, 1.85–86. "the carnage/And devastation that dyed the Arbia red." (Trans. Robert Pinsky) The Arbia is a stream near the site of the battle at Montaperti, where Farinata, to whom Dante speaks, led the Ghibellines to victory over the Guelphs in 1260.

[3]*Duccio:* Duccio di Buoninsegna (c. 1255–1260–c. 1318–1319), born in Siena, one of the most influential artists of his age.

[4] *Ambrogio Lorenzetti:* or Ambruogio Laurati; c. 1290–1348) painter of the Sienese school, active between approximately 1317 to 1348. His elder brother was the painter Pietro Lorenzetti.

[5]*Pietro Lorenzetti:* (or Pietro Laurati; c. 1280–1348) Italian painter active between approximately 1306 and 1345.

[6]*Sir John Hawkwood:* (1320–1394) English mercenary or *condottiero* active in 14th century Italy. The French chronicler Jean Froissart knew him as *Haccoude* and Italians as *Giovanni Acuto.* Hawkwood served first the Pope and then various factions in Italy for over 30 years.

[7]*Pandolfo Petrucci:* (1452–1512) ruler of Siena from c. 1500 to 1512; a brutal authoritarian and absolutist, but careful to pacify the people of Siena by improving the city's economy and encouraging the advancement of art.

[8]*Blaise de Montluc:* Blaise de Lasseran-Massencôme, seigneur de Montluc (c. 1502–1577), was a marshal of France.

9 *“Vous etes digne…”:* You deserve undying praise.

[10]*Jaroslław Iwaszkiewicz:* also known under his literary pseudonym *Eleuter* (1894–1980) Polish poet, essayist, dramatist, and writer.

[11]*Simone Martini:* (c. 1284-c. 1344) Sienese painter, major figure in the development of early Italian painting, thought to have been a pupil of Duccio di Buoninsegna. Martini died while in the service of the Papal court at Avignon.

[12]*Bernard Berenson:* (1865–1959) American art historian specializing in the Renaissance.

[13]*Moniuszko:* (1819–1872) Polish composer, conductor, and teacher whose musical style is filled with Polish folk themes.

[14]*Silenus:* companion and tutor to the wine god Dionysus. The name is derived from Silenoi, the followers of Dionysus, drunks, usually bald and fat with thick lips, squat noses, and human legs. Later, the plural “silenoi” went out of use and references were to one individual named Silenus.

[15]*Chessman:* Caryl Whittier Chessman (1921–May 2, 1960) convicted robber and rapist who became a Death Row inmate in California. Chessman's case attracted worldwide attention, and as a result he became a focus for the movement to ban capital punishment.

[16]*tympana:* semi-circular or triangular decorative wall surfaces over an entrance bounded by a lintel and arch, often containing sculptures or other ornaments

17 *"O Omega, the violet ray of his eyes":* from the poem "Voyelles" (Vowels) by Arthur Rimbaud.

[18]*triforium:* space in a church above the nave arcade, below the clerestory, and extending over the vaults, or ceilings, of the side aisles.

[19]*Jankowski:* Possibly Czeslaw Jankowski (1857–1929), Polish poet, critic, and amateur painter.

[20]*Domenico Beccafumi:* Domenico di Pace Beccafumi (1486–1551) Italian Renaissance-Mannerist painter active predominantly in Siena.

[21]*Piccolomini:* Enea Silvio Piccolomini (1405–1464) was Pope from 1458 until his death in 1464. Born at Corsignano in the Sienese territory of a noble but decayed family. His longest and most enduring work is *Commentaries*, the only autobiography ever written by a reigning Pope.

22*Verrocchio:* Andrea del Verrocchio, born Andrea di Michele di Francesco de ’Cioni, (c. 1435–1488) sculptor, goldsmith, and painter who worked at the court of Lorenzo de ’Medici in Florence.

[23]*Ghirlandaio:* Domenico di Tommaso Curradi di Doffo Bigordi (1449–1494) Florentine painter. The nickname “Il Ghirlandaio” (garland-maker) came to Domenico from his father, a goldsmith who was famed for creating the metallic garland-like necklaces worn by Florentine women.

[24]*Mirrors:* Mirrors for princes (Latin: *specula principum*), medieval or Renaissance textbooks, histories or literary works creating images of kings for imitation or avoidance, often composed at the accession of a new king. One famous "mirror" is *Il Principe* (c. 1513) by Machiavelli.

[25]*Jacopo della Quercia:* (c. 1374–1438), sculptor of the Italian Renaissance, a contemporary of Brunelleschi, Ghiberti, and Donatello, and regarded as a precursor of Michelanagelo.

[26]*a provincial Modugno:* Domenico Modugno (1928–1994) was a Grammy Award-winning Italian singer, songwriter, actor and later in life, a member of the Italian Parliament.

[27]*Palace of Culture:* originally the Joseph Stalin Palace of Culture and Science, a vast building erected in the 1950s in downtown Warsaw as a "gift from the Soviet Union" and used for public events, now housing cinemas, theaters, a university, and an exhibition center.

28 *"The Red Poppies of Monte Cassino":* Polish song of the Second World War Italian campaign.

[29]*Sassetta:* Stefano di Giovanni (c. 1390?–1450) preeminent artist of 15th century Siena. His first documented work was an altarpiece for the Arte della Lana (guild of wool merchants) in 1423–6; his masterpiece a double-sided altarpiece for San Francesco, Borgo San Sepolcro 1437–1444.

30*Guido da Siena:* also *Guido di Graziano*, Italian Byzantine style painter of the 13th century. The church of S. Domenico in Siena contains his *Virgin and Child Enthroned*.

[31]*Folgore da San Gimignano:* pseudonym of Giacomo di Michele or Jacopo di Michele (c. 1270–c. 1332), Italian poet. His humorous and satirical (anti-Ghibelline) poems, mostly sonnets, are written in a derivation of Provençal.

[32]*Andrea Vanni:* (1332–c. 1414) Sienese painter, correspondent of St. Catherine, member of the Great Council, and twice an Envoy to the Pope. He decorated three chapels in the cathedral of Siena, finished other work on its facade in 1380; and in 1398 painted an "Annunciation" for it.

[33]*Mattea di Giovanni:* (c. 1430–1495) Sienese painter. He originally came from Borgo san Sepolcro and he painted the wings and predella (Pinacoteca Sansepolcro) of the altarpiece of which Piero della Francesca's *Baptism of Christ* was the center panel.

[34]*Domenico Veneziano:* (c. 1410–1461) early Renaissance painter active mostly in Perugia and Tuscany.

[35]*Sano di Pietro:* (1406–1481) early Renaissance painter from Siena.

[36]*Zwischenruf:* German: interjection, aside.

[37]*Neroccio:* Neroccio di Bartolomeo de 'Landi (1447–1500) painter and sculptor. In 1475 he created a statue of Saint Catherine for the Sienese church dedicated to her. In 1483, he designed the *Hellespontine Sybil* for the mosaic pavement of the Cathedral of Siena. A student of Vecchietta.

[38]*Vecchietta:* Francesco di Giorgio e di Lorenzo (1412–1480), also known as Lorenzo di Pietro, Sienese painter, sculptor, goldsmith, and architect, among the artists profiled in Vasari's *Lives*.

[39]*Sodoma:* (1477–1549?) Mannerist painter Giovanni Antonio Bazzi whose manner superimposed the High Renaissance style of early 16th-century Rome onto the traditions of the Sienese school.

40*Ungaretti:* Giuseppe Ungaretti (1888–1970), Italian modernist poet. The poem is titled “Canto” (Song)

[1] *"Il y a du louche…":* Fr. there's something fishy about this business.

[2]*Institution of Honor and Bread:* organization founded in…to provide financial support to veterans of the Polish independence movement living in emigration.

[3]*Zamoyski:* count Władysław Zamoyski, or Zamojski (1853–1924), member of an old Polish noble family, philanthropist engaged in numerous social projects on behalf of Poles and Polish culture both in Paris where he was born, and in Poland, where he died.

[4]*chevalier de Jaucourt:* Louis de Jaucourt (1704–1779) French scholar and the most prolific contributor to the *Encyclopédie*. He wrote about 18,000 articles, or 25% of the encyclopedia.

[5]*Girart de Roussillon:* (c. 810–877/879?) Burgundian chief who became Count of Paris in 837, and titular hero of a 12th century *chanson de geste*, probably written by a monk in the abbey of Pothières or Vézelay, both of which were founded in about 860 by Girart.
The text from which Herbert quotes is in a dialect midway between French and Provençal:

> *He sees coming from afar/the lady and her servants/and her most private virgin maids,/who came carrying sand for scouring and building/so much that they barely had strength to climb.*

[6] *Abbot Suger:* (c. 1081–1151) abbot-statesman, historian, and influential first patron of Gothic architecture. Served as a regent of the kingdom (1147–1149) during the Second Crusade.

[7]*Renaud de Montauban:* fictional hero introduced to literature in the 12th century *chanson de geste* as one of the Four Sons of Duke Aymon: Renaud, Richard, Alard, and Guiscard; their cousin is the magician Maugris who has a magical horse Bayard and the sword Froberge.

[8] *Étienne Boileau:* (1200/1210–1270), was one of the first known provosts of Paris. Boileau brought together the regulations on the police, industry, and the trades of Paris in his Book of the Trades (1268), the oldest document on the legislation of communities of craftsmen in France.

[9]*Étienne de Bonneuil: fl.* 1287–8) French architect of the ambulatory and radiating chapels at the Cathedral of the Holy Trinity, Uppsala, Sweden (from 1287), the largest church in Scandinavia.

[10]*Wren:* Sir Christopher Wren (1632–1723) 17th century English designer, astronomer, geometer, mathematician-physicist, and architect. Wren designed 55 of 87 London churches after the Great Fire of London in 1666, including St. Paul's Cathedral in 1710.

[11]*Vanbrugh:* Sir John Vanbrugh (1664–1726) English architect and dramatist, perhaps best known as the designer of Blenheim Palace and Castle Howard. He wrote two Restoration comedies, *The Relapse* (1696) and *The Provoked Wife* (1697).

[12]*Pierre de Montreuil:* or Pierre de Montereau (c. 1200–1266/1267) French Gothic architect, author of the Sainte-Chappelle in Paris as well as a contributor to a number of other architectural works, including the Cathedrals of St. Denis and Notre Dame.

[13]*Villard de Honnecourt:* Villard, active in the 13th century, may have been an itinerant master-builder of Picardy in northern France. His fame rests entirely on his surviving portfolio of 33 sheets of parchment containing about 250 drawings from about the 1230s.

[14]*Jean Mignot:* French architect, active in the late 14th and early 15th centuries. Consulted on the Milan cathedral (c. 1399) he argued that the building would collapse if completed as planned.

15*Alexander Neckam:* also Neckham or Nequam (1157–1217) English scholar, Augustinian canon and author of many theological works as well as *De naturis rerum*, a manual of scientific knowledge, which contains the earliest European notices of the magnet as a guide at sea.

[16]*Roger Bacon:* (c. 1214–1294), also known as Doctor Mirabilis, English philosopher and Franciscan friar, sometimes credited as one of the earliest European advocates of the modern scientific method inspired by the works of Plato via early Islamic scientists.

[17]*Il se peut que le roy nous enchante:* The king may be playing us a trick./First he made twenty of sixty./ Then four of twenty and ten of thirty…/ Gold and silver are all gone./ We'll never get any of it back.

[1]*Montségur:* fort in the Ariège department in southwestern France, perched at a precarious 3000-foot altitude; one of the last strongholds of the Cathars. The present fortress, though described as one of the Cathar castles, is actually of a later period.

[2]*Mazdeic:* Zoroastrian; from “Ahura Mazda,” the supreme deity of Zoroastrianism.

[3]*Contra Faustam:* full title, *Contra Faustum Manichaeum* (Against Faustus the Manichean), written ca. 400 A.D. Augustine mentions his acquaintance with Faustus in his *Confessions*.

[4]*Basil I:* called the Macedonian (circa 811–886) Byzantine emperor from 867 to 886. Born a peasant in Thrace of Armenian origins, he rose in the imperial court, and usurped the imperial throne from Michael III. He led a revival of imperial power and a renaissance of Byzantine art.

[5]*Giovanni di Lugo:* also known as John de Lugio, member of a Cathar group called Albanenses.

[6]*Pierre de Castelnau:* (died 1208), French ecclesiastic. In 1199 he was archdeacon of Maguelonne, and was appointed by Pope Innocent III as one of the legates for the suppression of the Cathars. He was assassinated on January 15, 1208 and beatified in the year of his death.

[7]*Arnaud Amaury:* or Arnaud Amalric (d. 1225), Cistercian monk, abbot of Cîteaux. In 1204 he was named a papal legate and inquisitor and sent by Innocent III to convert the Albigensians.

[8]*St. Bernard of Verfeil:* Bernard of Clairvaux (1090-August 20, 1153), Cistercian monk, preached against heresy at Verfeil in 1145. Sent away without a proper hearing, he is said to have cursed the town with the words *Viridefolium, desiccet te Deus!* (“Verfeil, may God dry you up!”).

[9]*Esclarmonde:* Esclarmonde de Foix (c. 1151–1215), also called Esclarmonde the Great, a prominent figure in Catharism. Widowed in 1200, she turned to the Cathar Church and received the consolamentum. She was likely involved in an initiative to rebuild the fortress of Montségur.

[10]*Simon de Montfort:* Simon IV de Montfort, Seigneur de Montfort-l' Amaury, 5th Earl of Leicester (1160–25 June 1218), French nobleman who took part in the Fourth Crusade (1202–1204), a prominent leader of the Albigensian Crusade.

[11]*Guy de Levis:* (1180–1233), lord of Mirepoix and *"maréchal de la foi"*, marshall of the faith, lieutenant to his overlord Simon IV de Montfort. Participated in the sieges of Termes, Castelnaudary, Beaucaire, and Toulouse, where Montfort died.

[12]*Master Gervaise:* perhaps Gervase of Tilbury (c. 1150–c. 1228), a 13th century canon lawyer, statesman, and writer.

[13]*Viollet-le-Duc:* Eugène Emmanuel Viollet-le-Duc (1814–1879) was a French architect and theorist, famous for his “restorations” of medieval buildings.

[14]*Guillaume de Tudèle:* William of Tudela (fl. 1199–1214), author of the first part of the *Chanson de la Croisade Albigeoise* or Song of the Albigensian Crusade, an epic poem in Occitan.

[15]*Guillaume de Puylaurens:* (c. 1200–after 1274) 13th century Latin chronicler, author of a history of Catharism and of the Albigensian Crusade; from 1244, chaplain to Raymond VII of Toulouse and present at Raymond's death in 1249.

[16]*Dom Vaissette:* Dom Joseph Vaissette (1685–1756) French scholar and ecclesiastic, author of historical and geographical works. Born in Gaillac, near Albi.

[17]*Las Navas de Tolosa:* Battle of July 16, 1212, turning point in Spanish medieval history. Alfonso VIII of Castile's army was joined by those of Sancho VII of Navarre, Pedro II of Aragon, and Afonso II of Portugal to defeat the Muslim Almohad rulers of the lower Iberian Peninsula.

[18]*Montfort/es mort…:* Monfort/is dead/…long live Toulouse/glorious and mighty city/*Paratge* and honor return!

[19]*Sicard de Marvejols:* or Bernart Sicart de Marvejols, 13th century poet; the quote is from his poem “Ab greu cossire.”

20 *Andrea da Firenze:* (d. 1415) Italian composer and organist of the late medieval era.

[21]*Chronicon:* Guillaume Pelhisson's *Chronicle* covers the period 1229–1244; it was (re-)published by Ouesset, Toulouse, in 1958.

[22]*Qui atal fara, atal pendra:* who so does the like, will suffer a like fate.

[23]*Queribus:* Château de Quéribus, one of five castles strategically placed to defend the new (1659) French border against the Spanish; sometimes regarded as the last Cathar stronghold after the fall of Montségur in 1244. In 1255 the Cathars remaining there slipped away from the French army.

[24]*Bertran d'Alamanon:* or de Lamanon (fl. 1229–1266); Provençal knight and troubadour, an official, diplomat, and ambassador at the court of the Count of Provence.

[25]*Matfre Ermengau:* or Ermengaud (d. 1322); Franciscan friar, legist, and troubadour from Béziers. Author of an Occitan grammar in 35,600 octosyllables called the *Breviari d'amor*, aimed at the reconciliation of love for God with the erotic amours of the troubadour lyric.

[26]*Guiraut Riquier:* (c. 1230–1292—not 1280, as Herbert writes) one of the last Provençal troubadours; he served under the Viscount of Narbonne and Alfonso, King of Castile.

[27]*Sordel:* Sordello da Goito or Sordel de Goit, 13th-century Lombard troubadour; around 1220 he was in a tavern brawl in Florence; and in 1226, while at the court of Verona, he abducted his master's wife, Cunizza, at the instigation of her brother, and later fled to Provence.

28*Arnaut Daniel:* Arnaut Daniel de Riberac, Occitan troubadour of the 12th century, praised by Dante as “il miglior fabbro” (the best craftsman).

[29]*Ramon d'Alfaro:* or Raymond d'Alfaro, brother-in-law of Raymond VII.

[30]*Raymond de Pereille:* (b.1190–1244?) the original “seigneur” of Montségur Castle.

[31]*Pierre Roger de Mirepoix:* (b.1194/1202–d.1244/62?) married Raymond de Pereille's daughter Philippa, becoming the co-seigneur of Montsegur, and effectively its commander.

[1] *Jacques de Molay:* (est. 1244–5/1249–50—1314) was the 23rd and last Grand Master of the Knights Templar, leading the Order from approximately 1292 until the Order was dissolved by order of the Pope in 1312.

[2]*Geoffroi de Charney:* or Geoffroy de Charnay, was Preceptor of Normandy for the Knights Templar, burned alive along with Jacques de Molay in 1314.

[3]*Foucher de Chartres:* c. 1055/1060–after 1127) medieval chronicler. Author of *Historia Hierosolymitana* (c. 1127),

[4]*Hugues de Payns:* (c. 1070–1136) a French knight from the Champagne region, co-founder and first Grand Master of the Knights Templar. With Saint Bernard of Clairvaux, he created the *Latin Rule*, the code of behavior for the Order.

[5]*Frederick Barbarossa:* Frederick I (1122–1190), crowned King of Germany in 1152, King of Italy in 1154, and Holy Roman Emperor in 1155; crowned King of Burgundy in 1178. The name Barbarossa, “red beard” came from the northern Italian cities he attempted to rule.

[6]*Richard the Lion-Heart:* Richard I (1157–1199) King of England from July 6, 1189 until his death in 1199; known as Cœur de Lion or the Lionheart even before his accession because of his reputation as a great military leader and warrior.

[7]*Philip Augustus:* Philip II Augustus (1165–1223) King of France from 1180 until his death.

[8] *John Lackland:* (1166–1216), King of England from 1199 until his death; nicknamed “Lackland” because, as his father King Henry II’s youngest son, he did not inherit land out of his family’s holdings, and because as king he lost English territories to France.

[9]*Frederick II:* Frederick II of Hohenstaufen (1194–1250) Holy Roman Emperor from his papal coronation in 1220 until his death.

[10]*Isabella:* (1212–1228), also known as Yolande of Brienne.

[11]*Jean de Brienne:* John of Brienne (c. 1170–1237), French nobleman who became John I King of Jerusalem by marriage, and was later invited to become John I, Latin Emperor of Constantinople.

[12]*Mamelukes:* or mamluk (Arabic for “owned”), converted slave soldiers in the service of the Muslim Arab caliphs from the 9th to the 16th centuries; they became a powerful military caste often defeating the Crusaders, and on more than one occasion seizing power for themselves.

[13]*Guillaume de Beaujeu:* the 21st Grand Master of the Knights Templar, from 1273 until his death in the siege of Acre in 1291. He dropped his sword and walked away from the walls. His knights remonstrated. Beaujeu replied: “I’m not running away; I’m dead. Here’s the wound.”

[14]*Philip the Fair:* Philip IV (1268–1314), son and successor of Philip III, reigned as King of France from 1285 until his death. He was the husband of Joan I of Navarre, by virtue of which he was King of Navarre (as Philip I) and Count of Champagne from 1284 to 1305.

[15]*King Henry the Pious:* Henryk II (c. 1196–1241), Piast Duke of Silesia-Wrocław, Krakow, and Southern Greater Poland from 1238 until his death.

[16]*Battle of Legnica:* battle near Legnica in Silesia on April 9, 1241 during the Mongol invasion of Europe. The army of Henry II, supported by the feudal nobility, and including Poles, Bavarian miners, and military orders, was roundly defeated by the Mongols.

[17]*Hospitallers:* or “Sovereign Military Hospitaller Order of St. John of Jerusalem of Rhodes and of Malta” Christian organization that began as an Amalfitan hospital founded in Jerusalem in approximately 1080 to provide care for pilgrims to the Holy Land. During the First Crusade it became a religious/military order charged with the care and defense of the Holy Land. After the Holy Land was retaken by Islamic forces, the Order operated from Rhodes and later from Malta.

[18]*Guillaume de Paris:* William of Paris, confessor of Philip IV of France; made inquisitor of France in 1305, he began a campaign against the Templars in 1307. Pope Clement V suspended William's powers after a complaint from Edward II of England, but he then reinstated him.

[19]*Astarte:* Greek form of the name of a goddess known from Northwestern Semitic regions, cognate with the goddess Ishtar in Mesopotamian texts.

[1] *Baldovinetti:* Alesso Baldovinetti (1427–1499), early Renaissance painter.

[2]*Wer der Dichter…:* Whoever wishes to understand the poet must go to the poet's country.

[3] *Aretino:* Pietro Aretino (1492–1556), Italian author, playwright, poet, satirist, and pornographer who wielded immense influence on contemporary art and politics.

[4]*Giovanni Pisano:* (c. 1250–c. 1315), Italian sculptor, painter, and architect. Son of the famous sculptor Nicola Pisano, he received his training in the workshop of his father.

[5] *Jacobus de Voragine:* or Blessed Jacobus de Varagine (c. 1230–1298), Italian chronicler and archbishop of Genoa. Author of the *Golden Legend*, a collection of the legendary lives of the greater saints of the church, one of the most popular religious works of the Middle Ages.

[6]*Chosroes:* also Khusro, Khosrau; name of a mythical Persian leader, in the *Avesta* of the Zoroastrians known as *Kavi Haosravah*, meaning "of good reputation." A number of rulers of Persia, Armenia, and the Middle East are known by this name.

[7]*Emperor Heraclius:* Flavius Heraclius (c. 575–February 11, 641), Byzantine Emperor of Armenian origin, who ruled the Eastern Roman Empire for over thirty years, from 610 to 641.

[8]*Bernardo Rossellini:* Bernardo di Matteo Gamberelli (1409–1464), better known as Bernardo Rossellino, Italian sculptor and architect, the elder brother of the painter Antonio Rossellino.

[9] *Joos van Gent:* or Joos van Wassenhove, or Giusto da Guanto (c. 1410–c. 1480), early Netherlandish painter who worked in Italy.

[10]*Melozzo da Forli:* (c. 1438–1494), Italian painter, the first who practiced foreshortening successfully, one of the most outstanding fresco painters of the 15th century.

[11]*Angelo Poliziano:* (1454–1494), classical scholar and poet, a reviver of Latin letters.

[12]*Oddantonio da Montefeltro:* (1428–1444), Duke of Urbino, killed in July 1444 by conspirators in the Ducal Palace with two of his counselors.

[13]*Cillenio:* Alessi Cillenio, pseudonym of Giuseppe Paolucci (1661–1730), poet and member of the Accademia degli Arcadi, an Italian literary academy founded in Rome in 1690.

[1] *Adieu Paris,...:* Farewell Paris. We seek love, happiness, innocence. We will never be far enough away from you. From Gerard de Nerval, *Sylvie.*

[2]*Clovis:* (c. 466–511) the first King of the Franks to unite all the Frankish tribes under one king. He also introduced Christianity.

[3] *Anne de Montmorency:* (1493–1567) French soldier, statesman, and diplomat. He became Marshal of France and Constable of France.

[4]*Ravaillac:* François Ravaillac (1578–1610) was a French factotum in the courts of Angoulême. A sometime tutor and Catholic zealot, he murdered King Henry IV of France in 1610.

[5]*Corneille de Lyon:* (early 1500s–1575), Netherlandish painter of portraits active from 1533 until his death in Lyon, France. In France and the Netherlands he is still known as *Corneille de La Haye* after his birthplace, The Hague.

[6]*Jean and François Clouet:* Jean (or Janet) Clouet (1480–1541), miniaturist and painter born in Brussels who worked in France during the Renaissance. He was the father of François Clouet (c. 1510–1572), a painter best known for detailed portraits of the French ruling family.

[7] *Jean Fouquet:* (1420–1481), French painter of the 15th century, a master of both panel painting and manuscript illumination, and the apparent inventor of the portrait miniature.

[8]*Bourdaloue:* Louis Bourdaloue (1632–1704), French Jesuit and preacher, born in Bourges. He preached often at the court of Versailles. On the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes he was sent to Languedoc to confirm new converts in the Catholic faith.

[9] *Julian Przyboś:* (1901–1970) Polish poet, essayist, and translator, one of the most important poets of the Kraków Avantgarde.

[10]*Sylvie:* novella by Romantic poet Gerard de Nerval (1808–1855) in which a paragraph in a newspaper plunges the narrator into memories of village festivals close to Senlis. He leaves Paris and is reminded of his former love, Sylvie.

11 *"J.J. sans argent…":* Jean-Jacques, without money, without shelter, in Lyon and yet without care of the future, often spends the night under the stars.

[12]*René de Girardin:* René Louis de Girardin (1735–1808), marquis de Vauvray, last patron of Rousseau, creator of the gardens of Ermenonville.

[13] *Stanisław Leszczyński:* (1677–1766) King of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, Duke of Lorraine and a count of the Holy Roman Empire (a rank bestowed by Emperor Frederick III).

[14]*De la composition…:* On the composition of landscapes on terrain or on the manner of embellishing nature near dwellings, uniting utility with pleasure.

15*William Kent:* (c. 1685–1748) eminent English architect, landscape architect, and furniture designer of the early 18th century.

[16]*the famous dandy Cobham:* perhaps John Ligonier, 1st Earl Ligonier, British military officer from a Huguenot family, a leading official of the cabinet that led Britain during the Seven Years' War. He spent his later years at Cobham Park in Surrey, where he boasted a harem of young girls.

[17]*William Shenstone:* (1714–1763) English poet and one of the earliest practitioners of landscape gardening through the development of his estate, *The Leasowes.*

[18]*Thomson, Gessner, Young, Gray:* James Thomson (1700–1748), Scottish poet and playwright, known for i.e. the lyrics of “Rule, Britannia!” Solomon Gessner (1730–1788), Swiss painter and poet; Edward Young (1681–1765), English poet, best known for *Night Thoughts*; Thomas Gray (1716–1771), English poet and classical scholar.

19 *"Des habitants de l'heureuse Arcadie…":* Inhabitants of happy Arcady,/If your manners are noble,/Rest here, taste the sweetness/And pleasures of an innocent life…

20 *"Ici repose l'homme de la Nature…":* Here rests the man of nature and truth.

[21]*Lesueur:* Eustache Lesueur or Le Sueur (1617–1655), French artist, one of the founders of the French Academy of painting.

[22]*Thérèse Levasseur:* chambermaid and seamstress who became Rousseau's wife.

23 *"L'avenir dira…":* the future will tell whether it wouldn't have been better for the peace of the Earth if neither Rousseau nor I had ever existed.

24 *“sous quelque épais feuillage”:* under some dense greenery.

[1]*Malebranche:* Nicolas Malebranche (1638–1715) French Oratorian and rationalist philosopher whose work attempts to synthesize the thought of St. Augustine and Descartes.

[2]*Bosch:* Hieronymus Bosch or Jeroen Anthoniszoon van Aken (1453–1516), Netherlandish painter known for the use of fantastic imagery to illustrate moral and religious ideas.

[3]*The Night Watch:* 1642 painting by Rembrandt, a central piece of the Rijksmuseum collection.

[4]*Van Eyck brothers:* Jan van Eyck (before 1395–1441), early Netherlandish painter active in Bruges, brother to painter Hubert van Eyck (c. 1366–1426), who worked on the Ghent altarpiece commissioned by Jodocus Vijdts, lord of Pamele, until he died, leaving it for Jan to finish.

[5] *"manche Erinnerungen…":* many reminiscences of the period of its flowering.

[6] *"Une lumiere douce…":* A soft light, a woolly and slightly drowsy atmosphere give Veere the allure of a fairy-tale town…Its quiet streets leave the visitor under a melancholy charm.

[7]*Fromentin:* Eugène Fromentin (1820–1876) French painter and writer, author of *Les Maîtres d'autrefois* (1876), an influential study of early Netherlandish painting and the Northern Baroque.

[8]*Benjamin Constant:* Henri-Benjamin Constant de Rebecque (1767–1830) Swissborn, nobleman, thinker, writer and French politician.

[9] *Jan Leeghwater:* (1575–1650) Dutch mill builder and hydraulic engineer pivotal to land reclamation programs along the flooded coast of the Netherlands in the 17th century.

[10]*Prince Maurice:* Maurits van Nassau (1567–1625), Prince of Orange 1618–1625, son of William the Silent. When his father was murdered in Delft in 1584, he took over as stadtholder at 16. He eventually organized the Dutch rebellion against Spain into a coherent, successful revolt.

[11]*Patinir:* Joachim Patinir (c. 1480–1524), Flemish history and landscape painter from the area of modern Wallonia.

12*Van Coninxloo:* Gillis van Coninxloo (1544–1607) painter of forest landscapes, the most famous of a large family of artists. He lived in Germany for several years to avoid religious persecution.

[13]*Seghers:* Hercules Pieterszoon Seghers or Segers (c. 1589–c. 1638) Dutch painter and printmaker.

[14]*Avercamp:* Hendrick Avercamp (1585–1634) Amsterdam-trained painter who in 1608 moved to Kampen. The deaf Avercamp was known as “de Stomme van Kampen” (the mute of Kampen).

15*Cuyp:* Aelbert Jacobsz Cuyp (1620–1691), one of the leading Dutch landscape painters of the 17th century; the most famous of a family of painters.

[16]*Potter:* Paulus Potter (1625–1654) Dutch painter specialized in animals, particularly cows, in landscapes. Potter died of tuberculosis, 28 years old, leaving about a hundred paintings.

[17]*Hobbema:* Meindert Hobbema (1638–1709), perhaps the greatest landscape painter of the Dutch school after Ruysdael.

[18]*De Momper:* Joos de Momper the Younger (1564–1635), also Josse de Momper, one of the most important Flemish landscape painters.

[19]*Jacob Ruysdael:* (or Ruisdael) (c. 1628–1682), Dutch landscape painter.

20 *Jan van Goyen:* Jan Josephszoon van Goyen (1596–1656) prolific landscape painter; about twelve hundred paintings and more than one thousand drawings by him are known.

[21]*Huygens:* Constantijn Huygens (1596–1687) prolific Dutch author and composer, Secretary to two Princes, and the father of the scientist Christiaan Huygens.

[22]*Esaias van de Velde:* (1587–1630) landscape painter born in Amsterdam, where his Flemish Protestant father had fled in 1585; he probably studied under his father and Gillis van Coninxloo.

[1] *Adriaen van Ostade:* (1610–1685), Dutch genre painter.

[2]*William Temple:* Sir William Temple, 1st Baronet (1628–1699), statesman and essayist, author of *Observations upon the United Provinces of the Netherlands,* 1687.

[3]*Peter Mundy:* (*fl.* 1600–1667), British merchant and employee of the English East India Company in Europe, India, China, and Japan. Mundy recorded the first English reference to "chaa" (tea). *The Travels of Peter Mundy, in Europe and Asia,* were published in five volumes from 1905–1936.

[4] *John Evelyn:* (1620–1706) English writer, gardener, and diarist; co-founder of the Royal Society, and author of *Fumifugium* (or *The Inconveniencie of the Aer and Smoak of London Dissipated*), the first book written on the growing air pollution problem in London, and many other books.

[5] *Amalia van Solms:* Amalia of Solms-Braunfels (1602–1675), Countess of Solms-Braunfels, was the wife of Frederick Henry, Prince of Orange.

[6]*Jacob Jordaens:* (1593–1678), Flemish Baroque painter of the Antwerp school; a convert to Protestantism, he was fined for heretical writings in Antwerp, then controlled by the Spanish.

[7]*Karel van Mander:* (May 1548–September 2, 1606), was a Flemish-born Dutch painter and poet, who is mainly remembered as a biographer of Netherlandish artists. As an artist he played an important role in Northern Mannerism in the Netherlands.

[8]*Samuel van Hoogstraten:* (1627–1678), painter of the Golden Age; first a pupil of his father while living at Dordrecht. On the death of Dirk van Hoogstraten, his father, he changed his residence to Amsterdam and entered the school of Rembrandt.

[9]*Willem van de Velde:* either the Elder (c. 1611–1693) or the Younger (1633–6 April 1707), both marine painters.

[10]*Pieter de Hooch:* (1629–1684) genre painter. He studied art in Haarlem under the landscape painter, Nicolaes Berchem and presumed to have been influenced by Vermeer. He died in 1684 in an Amsterdam insane asylum, though how he came to be there is unrecorded.

[11]*Frans van Mieris:* the Elder (1635–1681), genre and portrait painter. The leading member of a Leiden family of painters, his sons Jan (1660–1690) and Willem (1662–1747) and his grandson Frans van Mieris the Younger (1689–1763) were also accomplished genre painters.

[12]*Gerard Dou:* (1613–1675), Dutch Golden Age painter, whose small, highly-polished paintings are typical of the Leiden *fijnschilders*. He specialized in genre scenes and is noted for his *trompe l'oeil* paintings and candlelit night-scenes with strong chiaroscuro.

[13]*Brouwer:* Adriaen Brouwer (1605–1638) Flemish genre painter active in Flanders and the Dutch Republic in the seventeenth century.

[14]*Gerard Terborch:* Gerard ter Borch (or Terburg) (1617–1681), Dutch genre painter.

[15]*Isaac van Ostade:* (1621–1649) Dutch genre and landscape painter, brother to Adriaen.

[16]*Matteus van Helmont:* (1623–1679), Flemish genre painter.

[17]*Teniers:* David Teniers the Younger (1610–1690), Flemish artist, was the more celebrated son of David Teniers the Elder. His son David Teniers III and grandson David Teniers IV were also painters. His wife Anna was the daughter of Jan Brueghel the Elder.

[18]*Jan Steen:* Jan Havickszoon Steen (c. 1626–1679) Dutch genre painter and innkeeper.

19 *Jan Lievens:* (24 October 1607–4 June 1674) Dutch painter, usually associated with Rembrandt, working in a similar style.

[20]*Gerrit Uylenburgh:* (ca. 1625–1679), Dutch art-dealer. After the scandal and bankruptcy Herbert describes, the English painter Peter Lely exerted his influence at the English court and secured Uylenburgh the post of Surveyor of the King's Pictures.

[21]*van Aelst, Kalf:* Willem van Aelst (1627–1683) Dutch artist who specialized in still-life painting with flowers or game; Willem Kalf (1619–1693), Dutch painter who specialized in still lifes. Later in his life, Kalf became an art dealer and appraiser.

[22]*Vondel:* Joost van den Vondel (1587–1679) the most prominent Dutch poet and playwright of the 17th century.

[23]*Lastman…Metsu…:* Pieter Lastman (1583–1633) painter of history pieces; his pupils included Rembrandt and Jan Lievens; Gabriel Metsu (1629–1667) painter of history paintings, genre works, and portraits.

[24]*Gerrit Berckheyde:* (1638–1698) painter of townscapes, taught by a brother, Job Berckheyde, and by Frans Hals; drowned in a canal in Haarlem, where he was born.

[25]*Sorbière:* Samuel de Sorbière (1615–1670), French philosopher and translator, best known for his promotion of the works of Pierre Gassendi and Thomas Hobbes; author of *Relation d'un Voyage en Angleterre* (Paris 1664), a cause of outrage among the English and brief arrest in France.

[26]*Carel Fabritius:* (1622–1654) Dutch painter and one of Rembrandt's most gifted pupils.

[27]*Godfried Schalcken, Adriaen van der Werff, Eglon van der Neer:* Schalcken (1643–1706), genre and portrait painter, noted for his mastery in reproducing candlelight; Van der Werff (1659–1722) painter of portraits and erotic, devotional and mythological scenes; Van der Neer (1635/36–1703) painter of historical scenes, portraits of elegant people, and later of landscapes.

[28]*Emmanuel de Witte:* (1617–1692) Dutch perspective painter, especially of church interiors.

[29]*Philips Wouwerman:* (1619–1668) painter of hunting, landscape, and battle scenes.

[30]*Jan van de Capelle:* (1626–1679) Dutch marine painter.

[1] *"galant tulip…":* from "The Sadnesse of Things, for Sapho's Sicknesse" from *Hesperides* by Robert Herrick, (1591–1674).

[2]*Lecluse:* Charles de l'Écluse, L'Escluse, or Carolus Clusius (1526–1609), Flemish doctor and pioneering botanist, and one of the most influential 16th century scientific horticulturists.

[3] *Jan van der Meurs:* or Jan de Meurs, or Meursius, (1613–1653) son of a historian of the same name; author of *Arboretum Sacrum* (1642).

[4] *Ambrosius Bosschaert the Elder:* (1573–1621) patriarch of a large family of painters, including his son and his brother-in-law, floral painter Balthasar van der Ast (1593/4–1657).

[5] *Troels-Lund:* (1879–1901) Danish historian and relative of Søren Kierkegaard.

[6]*Augier Ghislain de Busbecq:* or Ogier G. de Busbecq (1520 or 1521–1592), writer, herbalist, and diplomat in the employ of three generations of Austrian monarchs.

[7]*Konrad Gesner:* or Gessner (1516–1565) Swiss naturalist and bibliographer. His five-volume *Historiae animalium* (1551–1558) is considered the beginning of modern zoology, and the flowering plant genus *Gesneria* (Gesneriaceae) is named after him.

[8] *John Tradescant:* either the Elder (c. 1570s–1638), or the Younger (1608–1662), both botanists, gardeners, and travelers, both Keeper of his Majesty's Gardens, Vines, and Silkworms.

[9]*Waermondt:* character in a pamphlet by Adriaen Roman called "T" Samenspraecken tusschen Waermondt ende Gaergoedt," or *Dialogues between Waermondt and Gaergoedt, Being the Continuation of the Rise and Decline of Flora* (1637).

[10]*Shlarafia:* or Schlaraffenland, German equivalent of the land of Cockaigne. A medieval mythical land of plenty, an imaginary place of where the harshness of medieval peasant life does not exist.

11 *"La maladie infectueuse…":* Infectious disease tends at once to perpetuate itself and, to ensure self-perpetuation, to modify according to circumstances.

[12]*Henry Pot:* Hendrik Gerritsz Pot (c. 1580–1657), Dutch painter. He lived and painted in Haarlem, where he was an officer of the militia.

[13]*Fortius:* Leiden professor of botany and successor to Clusius' chair in Leiden.

[1]*Pieter de Molijn:* English-born Dutch Baroque painter, printmaker, and draftsman (1595–1661).

[2]*Douanier Rousseau:* Henri Julien Félix Rousseau (1844–1910) French Naive Post-Impressionist painter; also known as *Le Douanier* (the customs officer) after his place of employment.

[3]*Kaspar van Kinschot:* also Caspar van Kinschot, Dutch Neolatin poet (1622–1649), whose work was published posthumously as *Caspari Kinschotii Poemata.* Painted by Terborch in 1646/47.

[4]*noir d'ivoire:* paint color, made from charred ivory waste.

[5] *Jean Puget de la Serre:* (1600–65). Librarian of Gaston d'Orléans, novelist, and historian. His manual was published as *Le secretaire de la four*, Paris, 1625, as *Le secretaire à la mode* in 1651.

[6]*Die Wahlverwandschaften:* Goethe's third novel of 1809, translated as *Elective Affinities*.

[7]*Max Friedländer:* (1867–1958) German art expert and art historian. Herbert quotes from *Von Jan van Eyck bis Bruegel*, 1916 (“From Jan van Eyck to Brueghel”).

[1] *Józef Czapski:* (1896–1993) was a Polish artist, author, and critic, as well as an officer of the Polish Army.

[2]*Car je est un autre:* For I is another; from a letter by Rimbaud to Paul Demeny of May 15, 1871.

[3]*Duyster:* Willem Corneliszoon Duyster (1599–1635), painter of genre scenes and portraits, often of soldiers.

[4]*in summa seductor civium…:* in brief, a seducer of citizens, a cheater of people, a corrupter of the youth, a defiler of women.

[5] *Johann Valentine Andreae:* (1586–1654), German theologian, who claimed to be the author of the *Chymische Hochzeit Christiani Rosencreutz anno 1459* (1616, Strasbourg, the *Chymical Wedding of Christian Rosenkreutz*) one of three founding works of the Rosicrucians.

[6]*Christian van Couwenberch:* also Christiaen van Couwenbergh (1604–1667), genre and history painter of the Delft school, son of a silversmith.

[7] *Socinians:* adherents of a form of Nontrinitarianism, named for Laelius Socinus (died 1562 in Zürich) and his nephew Faustus Socinus (died 1604 in Poland). The Socinians congregated especially in Transylvania, in Poland, and in the Netherlands. They rejected the views of orthodox Christian theology on God's omniscience, the Trinity, the divinity of Christ, and soteriology.

[8]*Bredius:* Abraham Bredius (1855–1946), art scholar and collector, director of Mauritshuis and Rijksmuseum; founder of the Bredius Museum in The Hague. His authority was damaged by his faulty judgment on the authenticity of Hans van Meegren' Vermeer forgery, *De Emmausgangers.*

[9] *"Es ist eine Feinmalerei":* It is a piece of fine art.

[10]*Witold Gombrowicz…upupienie:* (1904–1969) Polish novelist and dramatist. "Upupienie," from the Polish *pupa*, or imposing on an individual an inferior and immature role, making an ass of him.

[11]*Robert Fludd:* also known as Robertus de Fluctibus (1574–1637) English physician, astrologer, and mystic. He was not a member of the Rosicrucians, but defended their thoughts in the *Apologia Compendiaria* of 1616. He had a celebrated exchange of views with Johannes Kepler concerning the scientific and hermetic approaches to knowledge.

[12]*Studion:* Simon Studion, 1543–1605. German teacher, poet, historian, archaeologist, and apocryphal writer; the author of the *Naometria* (Temple Measure, 1596), a combination of mathematics, laws of nature, plan of the building of the allegorical Temple, and prophecy.

[13]*Jacob Boehme and Theophrast Bombastus of Hohenheim:* Böhme (1575–1624) German Christian mystic and theologian; von Hohenheim (1493–1541) physician, botanist, alchemist, astrologer, and general occultist. He later took up the name Theophrastus Philippus Aureolus Bombastus von Hohenheim, and still later the title Paracelsus (equal to or greater than Celsus, a Roman encyclopedist, Aulus Cornelius Celsus from the first century known for his tract on medicine). He is also credited for giving zinc its name and is regarded as the first systematic botanist.

[14]*Christian Rosenkreutz:* legendary founder of the Rosicrucian Order.

[1]*Hoorn and Egmont:* Philip de Montmorency (1524–1568), also known as Count of Hoorn, became stadtholder of Guelders in 1555, an admiral of Flanders, and a knight of the Golden Fleece in 1556; Lamoral, Count of Egmont, Prince of Gavere (1522–1568), general and statesman in Flanders just before the start of the Eighty Years' War; their execution helped spark the national uprising that eventually led to the independence of the Netherlands.

[2]*William the Silent:* William I, Prince of Orange (1533–1584), (Dutch: *Willem de Zwijger*), or William of Orange, main leader of the Dutch revolt against the Spanish that set off the Eighty Years' War and resulted in the formal independence of the United Provinces in 1648.

[3]*Emanuel van Meteren:* (1535–1612) Flemish historian and Consul for the traders of the Low Countries in London.

[4]*Duke of Alva:* Fernando Álvarez de Toledo y Pimentel, 3rd Duke of Alba (1507–1582), Spanish general and governor of the Spanish Netherlands (1567–1573), nicknamed “the Iron Duke” by the Protestants of the Low Countries because of his harsh rule and cruelty.

[5]*Don Luis de Requesens:* Luis de Zúñiga y Requesens (1528–1576), Spanish governor of the Netherlands, succeeded the Duke of Alba and governed in a time of crisis under Philip II.

[6]*Hendrik Vroom:* Hendrik Cornelisz Vroom (1566–1640) Dutch painter, introduced the marine subject to western European painting as an independent genre.

[7] *La Hollande est de religion d'Erasme:* Holland is of the religion of Erasmus.

[8] *Jakob Adriaensz Backer:* (1609–1651) was a prolific Dutch Golden Age painter, mainly of portraits and religious, pastoral, and mythological subjects.

[1] *Jan van Olden Barneveldt:* also Johan van Oldenbarnevelt (1547–1619) Dutch statesman, who played an important role in the Dutch struggle for independence from Spain.

[1]*William Ysbrantz Bontekoe:* (1587–1657) was a skipper in the Dutch East India Company (VOC), who made only one voyage for the company (1618–1625); a journal of his adventures appeared in 1646 as the Journal or memorable description of the East Indian voyage of Willem Bontekoe from Hoorn, including many remarkable and dangerous things that happened to him there.

[1] *Jan Pietersoon Coen:* (1587–1629) was an officer of Dutch East India Company (VOC) in the early seventeenth century, holding two terms as its Governor-General of the Dutch East Indies.

[1]*Jan Swammerdam:* (1637–1680) biologist and microscopist. His work on insects demonstrated that the various phases during the life of an insect—egg, larva, pupa, and adult—are different forms of the same animal. He came under the influence of the Flemish mystic, Antoinette Bourignon, but did not give up his scientific studies. He died at age 43 of malaria. In 1737–1738, a half century after his death, his papers appeared in Latin as *Biblia naturae Book of Nature*).

[1]*Cornelis Drebbel:* (1572–1633) Dutch inventor of the first navigable submarine in 1620; he contributed to the development of measurement and control systems, optics, and chemistry. Towards the end of his life, in 1633, Drebbel was involved in a plan to drain the Fens around Cambridge, while living in near-poverty running an ale house in England.

[1] *Jacob van Heemskerk:* (1567–1607) Dutch explorer and later admiral in the Battle of Gibraltar, after which he died of cannonball wounds. With Willem Barents, he wintered in the Arctic (1596–97) in a house made of driftwood and ship's timber.

[2]*Willem Barents:* Willem Barentsz (c. 1550–1597) Dutch navigator and explorer, a leader of early expeditions to the far north; died returning from Novaya Zemlya with Jacob van Heemskerk.

[3] *Almond King:* Figure from Polish tradition, crowned on the Feast of Three Kings (January 6).

[1] *Anton van Leeuwenhoek:* also Antonie van L. (1632–1723) Dutch tradesman and scientist from Delft, the Netherlands, commonly considered to be the first microbiologist. Van Leeuwenhoek acted as the executor when the painter Johannes Vermeer, also of Delft, died in 1675.

[1]*Cornelis Troost:* the name ordinarily refers to an Amsterdam painter (1697–1750) of portraits, some of actors (Troost started out as an actor) in famous roles, as well as witty genre scenes.

[2] *Abraham Anslo:* perhaps based on Cornelis Claesz Anslo (1592–1646), a Mennonite preacher painted several times by Rembrandt.

[1]This poem, without a dedication, and slightly altered, appeared in the collection *Rovigo* (1992).

[2]*Eksekias:* Attic potter and painter, representative of the black-figure style, active ca. 550–525 BCE. Nine works signed by Eksekias are known to us, among them the one described in this poem, *Dionysus in a Boat*, a *kylix* kept in the State Collection of Ancient Art in Munich.

[1]The title derives from Rudyard Kipling's poem of 1919, sent to Herbert in a 1991 letter by his friend Aleksander Schenker, who had translated it into Polish and also offered the following commentary: *In 1919, clearly under the impression of the revolutionary movements then sweeping across Europe, Rudyard Kipling wrote a ballad, in which he contrasted the good sense of religious dicta and folk sayings with new ideologies and social experiments. The Copybook Headings of the ballad's title are precisely the essential maxims that pupils at British schools had to copy into their notebooks. In Kipling's prophetic vision, societies that depart from the Gods of the Copybook Headings and succumb to the Gods of the Marketplace, or the temptations of fashion, will be deservedly punished. It is interesting that Kipling in his poem uses the Shakespearean phrase "brave new world"* (Tempest, *Act V) thirteen years before Aldous Huxley popularized it in the title of his famous anti-utopian novel.*

[2]In the 1999 U.S. edition of *King of the Ants* the title of this piece was mistranslated as *Eos*, perhaps because Herbert left out the full stops in one version of the manuscript, obscuring the connection between the piece and R. M. Rilke's poem "Orpheus. Eurydice. Hermes."

[1] *"In one of his Isthmian Odes, Pindar…":* Pindar's Fourth Isthmian Ode (3.3).

[2]*Diodorus Siculus:* Greek historian of the first century BCE from Agyrion on Sicily. Author of the history [*Bibliotheke*] in fourteen volumes, of which only Books I–V and XI–XX were preserved intact, the rest existing in fragmented form.

[3]*The Renaissance painter Antonio Pollaiuolo:* Antonio del Pollaiuolo (1432–1498), active mainly in Florence. Among his works is the cycle of paintings *The Labors of Hercules*. His miniature painting on wood, *Hercules Fights Antaeus* (18x12 cm), is in the Uffizi Gallery in Florence.

[4]*chthonic:* born from the earth, subterranean. In Greek mythology, the chthonic gods are the gods of the underworld and death, but also of fertility—Demeter, Hades, Persephone, among others—as well as the three judges Minos, Radamanthys, and Ajakos.

[5]*Tingis:* now Tangier in northern Morocco. In antiquity, a Phoenician colony, and from ca. 45 A.D. the capital of the Roman province Mauretania Tingitana.
For a long time "Antaeus" was introduced by the following passage, later eliminated:

My attitude to Heracles changed with the passage of years, swayed dramatically from boyish worship to youthful admiration and later even skeptical distance and dislike. For a certain time I entertained the idea of inventing a new biography for him, cleansed of incomprehensible furies and crimes. An impious project. His essence is a splendid mixture of the great and the small, the exalted and the disgusting, the divine and the arch-human.

But even when I distanced myself from the hero, I never lost my admiration for his industry. I know it sounds blasphemous. It's as if you were to call Aphrodite a pretty girl or Hephaestus an able smith. But I insist: Heracles was industrious as an ant, as a volcano, as a Protestant artisan.

The famous Dodecathlos[6] does not cover the hero's astonishing diligence. The paths of his wanderings run the length and the width of the geography we know or intuit. And what a profligacy of landscapes serving as a backdrop to his wrestling matches with the world—deserts and seas, snowy plains and forests, spirit worlds and stables.

It is a remarkable thing that Heracles accomplished so much as it were in the margins of his main undertakings, working a double shift, so to speak, and even a triple shift. Like a star overburdened with responsibilities, and with a very irregular private life to boot, time and time managing to give charity concerts, he performs disinterested acts that truly can add no shade, no color to his majestic portrait.

Wandering in search of the apple of the Hesperides in the realm of the expansive gardens of the gods, Heracles set Prometheus free, killed the cruel tyrant Busiris[7] and fought a duel with Antaeus “along the way.”

[6]*Dodecathlos:* Gr. Heracles' twelve labors.

[7]*Busiris:* mythical king of Egypt, who ordered all foreigners to be killed, so that he bring them as a sacrifice to Zeus. He also tried to kill Heracles as he returned from the garden of the Hesperides.

[1] *According to the Archpoet:* Homer, *Iliad*, VIII. 368.

[2]*Hesiod mentions Cerberus twice:* Hesiod, *Theogony* 310–312 and 769–771.

[3]*Kora:* Persephone, daughter of Zeus and Demeter, taken to the underworld by Hades.

[4] *Andokides:* Attic potter, active ca. 540–520 bce; he is associated with the invention of the black figure technique; a number of his vases are decorated in red figure technique. The amphora from the Louvre mentioned here (ca. 520–510 bce) is a red-figure work.

[1] *Gotha almanac:* genealogical-diplomatic almanac published in German and French in the German city of Gotha from 1763 to 1944 and from 1956 onward.

[1]One of the typescripts of the essay includes an epigraph taken from Plutarch, *Moralia*. On the ingenuity of animals (11):

> It is impossible to relate in full detail all the methods of production and storage practiced by ants, but it would be careless to omit them entirely. Nature has, in fact, nowhere else so small a mirror of greater and nobler enterprises. Just as you may see greater things reflected in a drop of water, so among ants there exists the delineation of every virtue. [Tr. H. Cherniss & W. Helmbold]

[2] *"Love and affection are found…": Iliad*, XIV. 216

[3]*Myrmidons:* from the Greek word for ant, *myrmex*. The descendants of the Myrmidons appear at Troy. *Iliad* IX. 185–191.

[4]*the scholar Jotvues:* a lightly coded reference to Joseph Vissarionovich Stalin; in Herbert's archive there are notes for a story called *Typhon* (intended as an addition to *The King of the Ants*), made on the back of an errata slip to J.V. Stalin's *Marxism and Problems of Linguistics*.

[5]*the ontological principle of identity:* point of departure for the thought of Parmenides of Elea (VI/V century bce).

[6]*apeiron:* Gk. infinity, according to Anaximander of Miletus (ca. 610–540 bce) the principle and foundation of all being, infinite and indeterminate matter.

[1]*The armies took their seats…: Iliad*, Book II.211–215; from a free translation by Herbert.

[2] *"Or still more gold…": Iliad*, Book II.229–231 from a free translation by Herbert.

[3] *Aetolia:* a rocky and barren part of mainland Greece (now the environs of Artinia and Lepanto) without a significant role in Greek cultural history.

[4]*a favorite motif of many painters…:* In the State Collection of Ancient Art in Munich there is a famous red-figure goblet with *Achilles killing Penthesilea* (ca.460 bce).

[1] *Astipalea:* island of the Sporades archipelago in the Aegean Sea, and a city of the same name (now Stampalia).

[2] *Ate:* personification of the blindness and error that lead to excess and crime. In the *Iliad* it appears chiefly in impersonal or allegorical form, but in Book XIX (91–95), Homer describes it as a female figure, “the oldest of Zeus’s daughters.”

[3]*Pausanias:* Greek writer, geographer, and traveler of the time of Antonin Pius and Marcus Aurelius (ca. 115–ca. 180) the author of *Travels in Greece*. He tells the story of Cleomedes in Book VI (9, 6–8), dating it to the time of the seventy-second Olympiad, around 488 bce.

[1]*Villa Borghese:* Palace with park grounds in Rome, now home to the Borghese Gallery and Museum.

[2] *one of those boys…:* perhaps an allusion to the death of Pier Paolo Pasolini (1922–1975).

[1]In the Herbert archive there is a separate sheet of paper with a fragment from Pliny (*Natural History*, II, 42) that Herbert seems to have envisioned as an epigraph to Endymion, but never used:

> But the wonder of everyone is vanquished by the last star, the one most familiar to the earth, and devised by Nature to serve as a remedy for the shadows of darkness—the Moon. By the riddle of her transformations she has racked the wits of observers, who are ashamed that the star which is nearest should be the one about which we know least…Tr. H. Rackham 1997

[2] *affetuoso:* affectionately

[3] *con tenerezza:* delicately, sensitively

[4]*Poor Python!:* in Greek myth, a dragon or monstrous serpent, son of Hera, who (according to the *Homeric Hymn to Apollo* cited in Robert Graves' *The Greek Myths*) conceived him parthenogenetically upon the wrath of Zeus; identified with Typhon. Consumed mortals at the foot of Mount Parnassus, near Delphi, and Apollo, wishing to build his own oracular site there, killed him with bow and arrows. Zeus established the Pythian Games in his honor.

[5]*Hypnos:* son of Night and Erebus, twin brother of Thanatos, the god of death, and the father of Morpheus.

[1]*sons of Aloeus:* Otos and Ephialtes, sons of Poseidon, borne to him by Iphimedea (wife of Aloeus). They held Ares, god of war, imprisoned in a cast iron cauldron or box for thirteen months, after which he was freed by Hermes.

[2]*This is how Herodotus described…:* Herodotus, *History*, IV. 62.

[1] *Securitas:* Roman personification of security, both of the citizen and the state.

[2] *sine die:* without fixing a day for future action or meeting.

[3]*Tertium non datur:* No third possibility; the logical principle of the excluded middle, according to which two contradictory statements cannot both be false.

[1]*It was Aristotle who closed the doors of art to him:* in the *Poetics* (1450a/VI) Aristotle writes “Besides, without action there could be no tragedy, but without character there could be…”. (tr. Stephen Halliwell).

[2] *Agrigentum:* Gr. Akragas, then Girgenti, and from 1927 onward Agrigento, a city on the southern coast of Scicily, founded by Greek colonists in 581 bce and destroyed many times by the Carthaginians and Romans. It contains the ruins of many temples, i.a. to Hera and Demeter.

[3] *Upelluri:* Anatolian (or Hittite) divinity, corresponding to Atlas.

[1] from *Mr Cogito*, 1974. Reprinted from *Collected Poems*.

[1]*Las Hilanderas:* oil painting by Diego Vélasquez, held in the Prado Museum in Madrid.

[1] from *Mr Cogito*, 1974. Reprinted from *Collected Poems*.

[1] from *Rovigo*, 1992. Reprinted from *Collected Poems*.

[1]*Hecuba:* wife of Priam, king of Troy, mother of fourteen children, all of whom died.

[2]*the bloody corpse of her small grandson:* Astyanax, the young son of Hector and Andromache. After the Greeks conquer Troy, the boy is killed—in some accounts by Odysseus himself—for fear of future acts of revenge. In Euripides' *Trojan Women*, a herald brings the body of Astyanax to Hecuba on Hector's shield.

[1] Herodotus tells the story of Phya in *History*, Book I.60.

[2]*pan-Athenian processions:* celebratory processions to mark an important Athenian holiday, held every four years in the last days of the month called Hekatombaion. See also note to the essay “Acropolis” in *Labyrinth on the Sea*.

[1]*some puffed-up fellow:* Aristotle.

[1]*that Swiss painter:* Arnold Böcklin (1827–1901), painter of works such as In the Sea and *The Play of the Waves*, both dated 1884.

[2] *Sitzbad:* Ger. a chair-like bathtub in which the thighs and hips are immersed in warm water, usually used for therapeutic treatments.

[1] *a lion head…:* a Chimera

[2]*Literaturwissenschaft:* literary studies

[3]*Boiardo:* Matteo Maria di Scandiano Boiardo (1441–1491), Italian poet, courtier to the d'Este family in Ferrara and governor of Modena. His main work is the unfinished epic *Orlando inamorato*, published in 1506.

[1] All the ellipses are in the Polish edition.

[1] *Some idiot from Ionia:* probably Xenophon (ca. 570–475 BCE).

[1] *One of the great islands of the world…:* Homer, *Odyssey*, Book XIX. 202–211. Tr. Robert Fitzgerald.

[2]*In judging discoveries…:* Leonard Woolley, *In Search of the Past*.

[3] *"Evans was extremely myopic…":* J. Evans, *Time and Chance. The story of Arthur Evans and his forebears*. London 1943.

[4]*Tout traité d'archéologie passe:* Every archaeology treatise passes muster.

[5] *"In February 1960…":* L. R. Palmer, *On the Knossos Tablets*, Oxford, 1963.

[6] *"There is a paradox here…":* Moses. I. Finley, *The Greeks*.

[7]*But afterward there occurred violent earthquakes and floods…:* Plato, *Timaeus* 25d (Translated by Benjamin Jowett, Princeton 1961).

[8]*Halfway between Thera and Thirasia…:* Strabo, *Geography*, I.3, 15.

[1] *Brundisium:* now Brindisi

[2]*Diktaion antron:* Dikte Cave

[3] *thólos:* ancient funeral building on a circular plan, often with a colonnade.

[4]*sub Iove:* under Jove, under the open sky.

[5]*hieron:* a holy place.

[6] *Asklepion:* temple of Asklepios, god of medicine and healing.

[7]*koilon:* a cavity or hollow. In the theater, the auditorium.

[8] *orchestra:* circular space surrounded by an audience, performance space of actors

[9] *"Here is Mycenae…":* Homer, *Iliad*, Book VII. 180; XI. 46.

10 *"And you, Iphigenia, will be the keyholder…":* Euripides, *Iphigenia in Tauris*, v. 1462–1467.

11 *"Now you will decay…": To the Pythian Apollo*, 1.185–187

12 *"Regardless of whether it was the last pagans…":* E. Bourguet, *Delphes*, Paris, 1925.

[13]*One Battos, a citizen of the island Thera…:* in Pindar, *Pythian Odes*, IV.

[14] *"Unfortunates, why do you not act?":* Herodotus, *History*, Book VIII.

[15]*the one who, as Pindar says, gave us the lute and inspiration…:* in Pindar, *Olympian Odes*, IX and elsewhere.

16*kallistefanos:* Gr. beautifully wreathed; a wild olive tree in Olympia, from whose leaves wreaths were made.

[17]*Radamanthus and his spouse Rhea:* Lucian in his *True History* has Radamanthus presiding over the Blessed Isles, but I cannot discover a connection between him and Rhea, wife of Kronos and mother of Zeus.

[18]*theoroi:* Gr. envoys to the oracle or to athletic games.

19 *"Delos, if you will…": To the Delian Apollo*, v. 51–60.

[1]The letter by Freud to Romain Rolland is titled *Un trouble de memoire sur l'Acropole*, and dated January 1936.

[2] *Ay de mi Alhama…:* Woe for my Alhama; The news was sent to him/that Alhama had fallen/He threw the letter into the fire/and had the messenger killed.

[1] *One can still make out…:* Pausanias, *Travels in Greece*, Book I.

[2] *“Il n’allait jamais…”:* He never dined out on the town.

[3]*The statue represents Athena standing…:* Pausanias, *Travels in Greece*, Book I.

[4]*naos:* the central part of a Greek temple.

[5]*metic:* resident alien, a person who did not have a citizen's rights in his Greek city-state of residence. Some were poor artisans and former slaves, while others were wealthy.

[6] *grosso modo:* roughly, approximately

[7] *"that which cannot be painted":* Pliny the Elder, *Natural History*, Book XXXV.

[8]*stylobate:* upper part of visible foundations, on which the columns stood.

9 *"All around the earth let out…": To Athena*, 1.9–13.

[10]*metope:* any of the square spaces between triglyphs or members in a Doric frieze.

[11]*architrave:* the lowermost member of a classical entablature, resting originally upon columns; or, a molded or decorated band framing a panel or an opening, especially of a door or window.

[12]*Arnold Walter Lawrence…:* in A.W. Lawrence, *Greek Architecture*, London, 1957.

13 *"With an eye to the city's glory…" "We are the soldiers of the gods…" "The Senate and the Roman people…":* Plutarch's *Lives*, "Sulla" and "Pericles."

14 *"Paintings thrown into the dust…":* Polybius, *History.*

15 *"If you find any sculptures…":* Cicero, *Letters to Atticus.*

16 *a temple in Athens dedicated to an unknown god:* Paul, *Acts of the Apostles* 17, 23.

[17]*peristyle:* a colonnade surrounding a building or open space; or, the open space surrounded by a colonnade.

[18]*apse:* a vaulted semicircular or polygonal recess in a building, especially at the end of the choir of a church.

19 *“O Athens—mother of wisdom…”: Nicetae Choniatae orationes et epistulae.*

20 *"Foreseeing the abandonment of Athens…":* F. Morosini, *Vera e distinta relatione dell'acquisto della città e fortezza d'Athene…* Venice-Bologna, 1689.

21*Vernhum:* assumed to be a name garbled by Jacob Spon, author of an account of travel to the Acropolis.

22 *"One day when I was drawing…":* E. Dodwell, *A Classical and Topographical Tour through Greece, during the years 1801, 1805, and 1806.* London, 1819.

[23]*frieze:* the part of a classical entablature between the architrave and the cornice.

[24]*pediment:* a low gable or gable-like feature, typically triangular and outlined with cornices.

[25]*Jacob Spon's three-volume report:* Jacob Spon, *Voyage d'Italie, de Dalmatie, de Grèce et du Levant…* (Lyon 1678–80).

[26]*High Porte:* also Sublime Porte, or Bab-i Ali, used to refer to the Divan (court) of the Ottoman Empire where government policies were established.

[27]*Voyage pittoresque dans l'Empire ottoman…:* by Choiseul-Goufffier, published in Paris in 1842.

[28]*Thomas Bruce Elgin:* Thomas Bruce, 7th Earl of Elgin and 11th Earl of Kincardine (1766–1841) British nobleman and diplomat, ambassador to the Ottoman Empire between 1799 and 1803.

[29]*Quod Gothi…:* What the Goths failed to do was done by the Scot.

[30]*Giovanni Battista Lusieri:* Italian landscape painter (ca. 1755–ca. 1821); from 1799 he led Lord Elgin's team of draftsmen, sculptors, and architects in Greece and Turkey and spent the rest of his life assisting with building Elgin's antiquities collection.

[31]*Turkish permit:* A *firman* (a document from the Turkish government authorizing operations) was needed to allow the sculptors to make casts or replicas of the marbles. The following is an excerpt from the firman:

> It is our desire that on the arrival of this letter you use your diligence to act conformably to the instances of the said Ambassador, as long as said five artists dwelling at Athens shall be employed in going in and out of the said citadel of Athens, which is the place of their occupations; or in fixing scaffolding around the ancient Temple of the idols, or in modeling with chalk or gypsum the said ornaments and Visible figures thereon; or in measuring the fragments and vestiges of other ruined edifices; or in excavating, when they find it necessary, the foundations, in search of inscriptions among the rubbish; that they be not molested by the said Disdar, nor by any other persons, nor even by you; and that no one meddle with their scaffolding or implements, nor hinder them from taking away any pieces of stone with the inscriptions or figures…(From B. F. Cook, *The Elgin Marbles*, London, 1984)

[32]*François-René de Chateaubriand:* Chateaubriand (1768–1848) published *Itinéraire de Paris à Jérusalem* in 1811.

[33]*images d'Épinal:* crude popular pictures; after French prints published by the printing house Imagérie d'Épinal in France in the 19th century.

[34]*anastylos:* reconstruction of columns.

35 *"A lithograph by Georgios Soutzos…":* N. Balanos, *Les Monuments de l'Acropole. Relèvement et conservation…* Paris, 1938.

36 *“O noblesse, o beauté simple et vraie!…”:* O nobility, o simple and true beauty! Goddess whose worship means reason and wisdom, you whose temple is an undying lesson of conscience and sincerity. From *La Prière sur l’Acropole* by Ernest Renan (1823–1892).

[1] *"The Athenians gave Pericles…" "Agamemnon spent ten years…":* quoted in Plutarch, *Lives.* Verse in the translation of B. Perrin.

[1] *“Such was Etruria’s power…” That very same day; “They had the custom of sitting down…” “To the sound of the flute…”:* Titus Livy, *History of Rome*, Book I, V, VII.

[2]*Cloaca Maxima:* Largest sewer.

[3] *hastati:* spearsmen

[4] *principes:* heavily-armed troops

[5] *triarii:* reserve troops

[6] *genetrix…:* progenitor and mother of superstition.

[7] *"...non enim hic..":* Not, as is the custom among those Tusci/to earn your dowry shamefully with your body. Plautus, *Casina*, 523–524.

[8]*Ventris:* M. Ventris, *The Decipherment of Linear B.* Cambridge, 1958.

9 *"During the reign of King Attys…":* Herodotus, Book I.

10 *"One can easily imagine what I felt.":* R. Bloch, *Les Etrusques.*

11 *"The Etruscans are neither a theory…":* D. H. Lawrence, *Etruscan Places*, London, 1932.

[1] *rana:* frog

[2]*Felix qui potuit…:* Happy is he who has come to know the causes of all things. Virgil, *Georgics*, 2, 490.

[3]*Maxima debetur puero…:* Much reverence is due to a boy. Juvenal, *Satires*, 14, 47.

[4]*Repetitio est mater…:* Repetition is the mother of learning.

[5]*Gallia Narbonensis:* Provence and Languedoc.

[6]*Massilia:* present-day Marseilles.

[7] *"tumultuantes Britannos…":* the Britons were rising up because their spies had been picked up [by the Romans].

8 *"desired the glory…" "Rome wanted to see…" "he made a triumphant entry…":* from Suetonius, *Lives of the Emperors*, Book 5: *The Deified Claudius.*

[9] *euthytonos:* a war machine, throwing missiles.

10*“in accordance with the old custom…” “plagued by a surfeit of cares…” “The enemy’s battle array…” “groves devoted to cruel superstitions…” “Boudica was flogged…” “without any obvious cause…” “It is an established fact…” “and in such an insolent mood…” “our cohorts and cavalry troops…”:* from Tacitus, *Agricola.*

[11]*limitanei:* soldiers guarding the border.

[12]*Quid salvum…:* Who will be saved if Rome perishes?

[13]*qui bene amat…:* who loves well, punishes well.

14 *"Gavius hic…":* from Cicero, *Second Pleading against Caius Verres*, Book 5.61: "This Gavius whom I am speaking of, a citizen of Cosa, when he (among that vast number of Roman citizens who had been treated in the same way) had been thrown by Verres into prison, and somehow or other had escaped secretly out of the stone-quarries, and had come to Messana, being now almost within sight of Italy and of the walls of Rhegium, and being revived, after that fear of death and that darkness, by the light, as it were, of liberty and of the fragrance of the laws, began to talk at Messana, and to complain that he, a Roman citizen, had been thrown into prison. He said that he was now going straight to Rome, and that he would meet Verres on his arrival there." (Trans. C.D. Younge)

[15]*consecutio temporum:* order of tenses.

[16]*Constitutio Antoniniana:* Constitution of Marcus Aurelius Antoninus, also called Caracalla (188–217), granting Roman citizenship to freemen throughout the Roman Empire.

[17]*Dis manibus:* Lat. To divine shades; of blessed memory

[18]*Odi et amo…:* Catullus, *Carmen 85*: I hate and I love. Wherefore would I do this, perhaps you ask? I do not know. But I feel that it happens and I am tortured.

[1] First published in a northern Polish weekly, *Tygodnik Wybrzeża,* in 1948, this essay was prefaced by a note from the editors: "The following article is the first in a series which the author calls *Poetics for Laymen.* These articles aim to clarify a range of obscured ideas on the value and meaning of the word as poetic material. We consider the views expressed by the author as matter for discussion and we hope they will provoke a response from our readers."

[2] *"Akerman Steppes":* poem from Adam Mickiewicz's celebrated cycle of *Crimean Sonnets*.

[1] On publication in *TW* in 1948, this piece was subtitled: “Second in the series *Poetics for Laymen.*”

[2]*Gałczyński:* Konstanty Ildefons Gałczyński, Polish poet (1905–1953). Quotation from a poem in the cycle “Noctes Aninenses” (Anin Nights, 1939) entitled “Nocny Testament” (Nocturnal Testament). Gałczyński is portrayed by Czeslaw Milosz in *The Captive Mind* as “Delta”

[3]*Who would know what it means…Juliusz Słowacki, from the poem Król-Duch,* or *Spirit King*.

[4]*I regulated…* Arthur Rimbaud, from *A Season in Hell (tr. Louise Varèse).*

[5] *Black A…:* “Vowels” trans. Wyatt Mason.

[6]*René Ghil:* French poet (1862–1925), disciple of Mallarmé developed "verbal instrumentalism," adapting elements from Wagner, Baudelaire, and Rimbaud into a poetic theory claiming to provide a scientific basis for the aesthetic equivalence of musical sound, color, and phoneme.

[7]*Norwid:* Cyprian Kamil Norwid (1821–1883) poet, dramatist, and artist, one of the second generation of Polish romantics.

[8]*Breathe in my…:* from a poem called “Poeci” (Poets) by Jerzy Liebert (1904–1931), a poet of the Polish interbellum; in the three poetry collections he published before dying of tuberculosis, he wrote on predominantly Christian and philosophical themes.

[1] First of a cycle of psychological sketches Herbert called *charactery* in Polish. They were printed in a journal called *DziŚ i Jutro* (Today and Tomorrow) under the pseudonym "Patryk."

[2] *Ama et quod vis fac!* A slight misquotation of St. Augustine's adage (formulated in a commentary to the Epistle of John 7,8): *Dilige et quod vis fac*: Love and do what you will.

[1] From Zbigniew Herbert and Henryk Elzenberg, *Korespondencja* (*Correspondence*: ZL, Warsaw 2002), edited by Barbara Toruńczyk.

[2] *An oak tree planted…:* Goethe has Wilhelm say this about Hamlet in *Wilhelm Meister's Lehrjarhre* (Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship, trans. E. Blackall, *Collected Works* Vol. 9, 1989.)

[1] Published in the journal *Dziś i Jutro* (Today and Tomorrow) under the pseudonym Patryk and accompanied by a reproduction of the painting “Peasant Dance” by Pieter Breughel (the Elder).

[1] Published under the pseudonym Stefan Marthà in an issue of *DziŚ i Jutro* (Today and Tomorrow) devoted to the anniversary of the birth of (among others) Leonardo da Vinci.

[2]*Benci:* Ginevra de'Benci, Italian woman of aristocratic family painted by Leonardo around 1476; the portrait now hangs in the National Gallery in Washington D.C.

[1]*Poisson model:* a discrete probability distribution expressing the probability of a number of events occurring in a fixed period of time if these events occur with a known average rate and independently of the time since the last event. Formulated by S.-D. Poisson (1781–1840).

[1]*Hermann Goeth:* Amon Göth (1908–1946) Austrian-born SS officer and commandant of the Płaszow concentration camp outside of Kraków. After the war, found guilty of murdering tens of thousands of people. He was hanged, successfully only on the third attempt, in September 1946.

[2]*Das Betreten…:* Forbidden to enter this site under punishment of death.

[3] *Kamienna:* or Skarzysko Kamienna, Polish town roughly halfway between Warsaw and Kraków, during the German occupation the site of a Nazi labor camp organized around an ammunition factory.

[1]This text was written for the international symposium *Ein Gedicht und sein Autor* (A Poem and its Author) held in Berlin in 1966 and published in an anthology of the same name. Published in *Wybrane Wiersze* (Selected Poems), edited by Ryszard Krynicki, Krakow, 2004.

[1]Written for a German radio program in 1966, this text was not used as intended but was published along with the previous text, *Why the Classics*, in the anthology *Ein Gedicht und sein Autor* (A Poem and its Author), edited by Walter Höllerer.

[2]*Nicolas Flamel:* Parisian notary, alchemist, and occultist (1330–1418).

[3]*Winckelmann:* Johann Joachim Winckelmann (1717–1768) German art historian and archaeologist, first to apply categories of style on a large, systematic basis to the history of art; decisive influence on the rise of the neoclassical movement in the late 18th century.

[1]*Il est bon de voyager…:* It is worthwhile traveling from time to time: it broadens the mind and stifles *amour-propre*. Sainte-Beuve (1804–1869).

[2]*humeur avide des choses nouvelles:* an avid taste for novelties

[3]*Lucien Febvre:* (1878–1956) French historian, co-founder (with Marc Bloch) of the *Annales* school of historiography.

[1] Written for a Silesian poetry festival in April 1972, at which Herbert took part in vehement discussions about art and political engagement with members of the "New Wave" of Polish poets, including Adam Zagajewski and Ryszard Krynicki, as well as a number of prominent critics.

[2]*In one of his essays Thomas Mann:* in “Der Künstler und die Gesellschaft” (The Artist and Society), 1952.

[3] *Joseph de Maistre:* Joseph-Marie, comte de Maistre (1753–1821) French-speaking Savoyard lawyer, diplomat, writer, and thinker. Influential spokesman for hierarchical authoritarianism in the period immediately following the French Revolution.

[1] *Słowacki:* Juliusz Słowacki (1809–1849) Polish Romantic poet, with Mickiewicz and Zygmunt Krasinski, one of the three "bards" of Polish literature.

[2]*Kochanowski:* Jan Kochanowski (1530–1584) Renaissance poet; commonly regarded as the greatest Polish poet as well as the greatest Slavic poet prior to the 19th century.

[1] Published in the journal *Zeszyty Literackie*, no. 86 (2004). Written as a lecture held at the Academy of Arts in Berlin in September 1975.

[2]*eine Strasse die der Teufel pflastert mit zerstörten Werten…:* A street that the Devil paves with destroyed values.

[1]Written in response to a 1976 questionnaire from the journal *Wież* (Tower) with the following questions: "*What do you like in the programming of Polish radio and television? How do you judge the present state of mass culture in Poland? What challenges do you think mass culture programming should respond to, taking into account its role in the life of a rapidly developing society? What expectations and social needs—particularly in the sphere of your interests—should be met in Polish mass culture in the coming years?*"

[2]*General Berling:* Zygmunt Henryk Berling (1896–1980) Polish general and politician. He fought in the war for Polish independence after WWI. During World War II he was sentenced to death *in absentia* for desertion from the Polish Army of general Anders. Later he became the commander of the Soviet-sponsored 1st Polish Army in the USSR.

[3]*Father Skarga:* Piotr Skarga (1536–1612; actual name: Piotr Powęski) was a Polish Jesuit, a preacher and leading figure in the Counter-reformation in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. He was called the "Polish Bossuet" due to his oratorical abilities.

[4] *Stefan Kisielewski:* (1911–1991), nicknames Kisiel, Julia Holyńska, Teodor Klon, Tomasz Staliński; a Polish writer, publicist, composer, and politician, one of the members of Znak.

[1] *Atticus:* born Titus Pomponius (c. 109 BC–35 B.C./32 B.C.), editor, banker, and patron of letters, best remembered as the closest friend of orator and philosopher Marcus Tullius Cicero.

[2]*cum lacrimis:* with tears, in mourning.

[3] *ars boni et aequi:* the art of what is good and right.

[4]*L'aura che'l…:* from Petrarch's Sonnet CCXLVI.

[5] *era il giorno…:* from Petrarch's Sonnet III.

[1] *Square of Heavenly Peace:* or Tiananmen Square.

[1]*Gordion:* the capital of ancient Phrygia, ruins of which are found on the site of the modern Turkish city of Yassihüyük, located approximately fifty miles southwest of Ankara.

[2] *the Stagirite:* Aristotle.

[3]*Onesikritos:* or Onesicritus (c. 360–c. 290 B.C.), Greek historical writer who accompanied Alexander on his campaigns in Asia; disciple of Diogenes of Sinope. He claimed to have been the commander of Alexander's fleet but was in fact only a helmsman. Author of a history of Alexander's campaigns, he is often cited and criticized for inaccuracies by later authors.

[1] *Schliemann:* Heinrich Schliemann (1822–1890) German businessman and archaeologist, an important excavator of Troy, along with the Mycenaean sites Mycenae and Tiryns.

[1] *Benito:* Mussolini (1883–1945)

[2] *Scipio Africanus:* Publius Cornelius Scipio Africanus also known as Scipio the Elder, and Africanus the Elder (235–183 B.C.), general in the Second Punic War and statesman of the Roman Republic; best known for defeating Hannibal at the final battle of the Second Punic War at Zama.

[1]*King of Pontus:* Mithradates VI; b. 134, d. 63 B.C., also known as Mithradates the Great (Megas) and Eupator Dionysius, was king of Pontus in northern Anatolia (now in Turkey) from about 119 to 63 B.C.

[1] *oaths of the Jeu de Paume:* David's famous sketch, *le Serment du jeu de paume* "the Tennis Court Oath") now hangs in the court of the Palace of Versailles. It depicts a seminal moment of the French revolution, when, on June 20, 1789, deputies of the Estates-General met at the court and vowed that they would not disband before the proclamation of a formal Constitution for France.

[1]*Avanzo:* Jacopo Avanzo, late 14th century Veronese artist formerly confused with Jacopo Avanzi da Bologna and with a Jacopo da Verona who worked in Padua. Avanzo's signature is found in the fresco decoration of the Oratory of St. George, Padua, where he collaborated with Altichiero.

[1]This piece was written in response to a 1998 questionnaire from the editors of the Catholic journal Znak, who asked the following questions:

> *"Where does "the Devil have his seat'? Do we experience the reality of evil in our lives, or is it a mistake or merely an effect of various socio-economic determinants that, like diseases, touch those who do evil, and their victims? Does experience permit the assumption that evil exists as an external force that takes possession of man? Can evil be "cunning," or perverse? How does it enter our lives? We directed these questions and a request to describe their personal encounters with evil (Evil?) to our authors."*

[2]*Rymanów:* Galician resort town where Herbert's parents spent holidays in the 1920s. Later used as a prisoner of war camp and a transit camp by the German occupation.

[1]Written as an introduction to a poetry evening at which Herbert, then gravely ill, could not be present; the text was read by a friend, Piotr Kłoczowski, and the poems were read by actors.

[2]*Karpiński:* Franciszek Karpiński (1741–1825) Leading Sentimental poet of the 18th century, well known for his religious works, many of which entered the Polish canon as hymns or carols, and highly prized by the Romantic generation.

[3] *Goodnight, Jacenta…:* from Karpiński, *Mazurek*.

[4]*In a little old church…:* From “Sowiński w okopach Woli” (Sowiński in the Trenches of Wola)

[5] *C'est une chanson…:* Jacques Prévert, "Les feuilles mortes" (Dead Leaves)

[6]*Why, Shade, do you depart…:* from “Rhapsodic Dirge in Memory of Bem”

[7]*Gajcy:* Tadeusz Gajcy (1922–1944) was a Polish poet and Armia Krajowa (Polish Home Army) soldier. He made his debut in the underground press in 1942 and died in the Warsaw Uprising of August-October 1944.

[8] *I write—as a gravedigger…:* from “Do potomnego” (To one in posterity).

[9] *Baczyński:* Krzysztof Kamil Baczyński (1921–1944) poet and Home Army soldier, one of the most renowned authors of the "Columbus Generation"—the young generation of poets born in the 1920s, many of whom perished in the Warsaw Uprising.

[10]*I've left no heir here on earth…:* from Juliusz Słowacki's famous 1840 poem "Testament mój."